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THE BLACKWOOD CULT

T. A. WATERS

A bizarre and ancient Evil was blotting out Wendy's sanity and life. Could she stay and fight it—in her own home town?

NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED

PRIESTESS OF EVIL

Midnight.

Suppose Katy Campbell really **was** a witch?

Walking towards Blackwood's outskirts, Wendy smiled nervously. The moon was radiant and cold, the air crisp. She wished she'd brought her sweater; that was all. She was not like the prejudiced, fearful old women of the town—not like the ones she hated.

Yet, suppose Katy Campbell tried to kidnap her, and . . .

A few lights shone from the gambrel-roofed old house when she got there. Someone was playing the Moonlight Piano Sonata. Again, Wendy tried to smile. But then, when she turned into the gravel path, the fear struck her full-force and unexpectedly—and turned her to ice.

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For my mother
with the hope that her professional eye will approve

THE BLACKWOOD CULT

T. A. WATERS

LANCER EASY EYE™ EDITIONS

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THE BLACKWOOD CULT

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CHAPTER ONE

WENDY GAZED at the letter, not wanting to read it again. If she could only pretend that it had gone astray, that it hadn't reached the ship before it left Southampton; such things happened often, and—

No.

Even if she hadn't been a bascially honest and forthright person in her dealings with others, denying the letter was futile. She would be expected to at least phone up to Blackwood as soon as the liner docked in New York, and then the strange request in the letter would only be repeated, this time by someone she cared about, someone she could not refuse.

But what on Earth could be wrong? Why would Uncle Edward want her to come up now, after such a long time? The whole thing seemed rather abrupt—and Wendy thought about the cold little town of Blackwood, and its aloof and

silent occupants—yes, not only abrupt but ominous.

She looked at the letter again, this time forcing herself to read it. A cold wind swept along the deck, and she shivered.

October 17

My dearest Wendy:

It must seem strange to receive a letter from Markham House, after all these years. My brother has many times in the past meant to communicate with you, in order that we could resolve those difficulties which caused your departure a few years ago. In any case, he has asked me to invite you to visit Blackwood, and your former home, on your return from Europe. There are some personal matters which he wishes to discuss with you, and he has asked me to stress the importance of at least a brief visit here.

As you know, your uncle has been in rather ill health for some time, and your cousin Gilbert and I agree that seeing you might prove beneficial to him, since it would permit him to bury the shadows of past mistakes and misunderstandings. We hope you will take the invitation in this light and come to Blackwood as soon as it is convenient on your return, and there may be others whom you wish to see.

We shall await you.

Agnes Markham

Wendy tried to shrug in bewilderment, but the movement turned into a shudder. Certain phrases her aunt had used, little ripples beneath the smooth social surface of the words—what was going on in Blackwood?

In spite of herself Wendy was curious. When she had departed the little town three years before, she had vowed that the frustrations and hypocrisy that lay foglike in the very fibre of the place would never be her worries again. It would have been useless to try to fight, to stay and make efforts against the flickering shadows and half-heard whispers. Blackwood was a town that had been dealt a death-blow by the arrival of the twentieth century, but it was dying slowly, and unpleasantly.

The air that rose up from the salt sea was chill and brackish, but Wendy did not feel it; her mind, almost against her will, was tumbling back through the maze of time, to those last few months in the little town. Blackwood rested serenely (on the surface, thought Wendy) on a rarely traveled byroad in upstate New York. It was old—very old; it had been settled only a few decades after the early towns of Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and its architecture as well as its manner showed the influence of those who had come from the coast towns to build inland.

Wendy's memories of Blackwood were a dismal ring of sorrow; and if there had been a real be-

ginning to them, it had been on that first visit, so long ago.

When you are but seven years old you have an advantage on the world. It underestimates you, and to adults you are invisible, for what could you know of the problems of life, of the disagreements, of the tensions? And so you move about, sometimes among troubled faces and voices carrying undercurrents that you aren't supposed to be able to understand.

But, though you might not think of yourself this way, you are a very aware child, so sensitive to atmospheres and impressions that in later years, not without some reason, you will think yourself somewhat psychic. You have an intelligent father, who thinks enough of your sense to have explained to you what happens when a woman in poor health bears a child; and though you do not understand all he tells you, as clear as crystal is the knowledge that, except for him, you are alone in the world.

Alone—for you have noticed the way some of your relative study you, not as a rather attractive little girl with straight golden hair, but as a problem, a problem that must be dealt with in some manner.

And so, from the moment you step off the train, with your father holding your gloved hand in the way that a proper gentleman would assist a young lady, your spirits begin to sink under the weight

of this curious town. What follows only reaffirms your uneasiness.

But even at your worst moments you cannot expect the horrible reality that pales every grim foreboding.

When they gather about you, and no one seems to want to speak, you scan the faces, but even as you do that odd sensitivity of yours has told you the message of these silent, troubled people—for your father is not among them.

There has been an accident, they tell you, and your father has been badly hurt. You look at them, and for the first time the emotion of hatred courses through you. You shout that if he were only hurt they would be taking you to him, and how can they lie to you about this?

And here memory blurs and runs, like a letter stained with teardrops.

Wendy sat down in the deck chair and pulled the blanket about her. Abstractedly she dabbed at the moist streaks down her face, and gazed out past the railings at the sea. In the dull and leaden twilight that seemed to come from everywhere the placid sea flickered quietly. It might almost have been the Styx, and Hades the next port of call.

Maybe it is, she thought.

Since Edward Markham and his sister Agnes were her only legally clear relatives, Wendy had

been put into their custody—by the same judge who had presided at her father's inquest. There was the brief, but shocking and sickening ritual of the burial, beside his wife, and then Wendy had returned to Blackwood.

Life with her uncle and aunt had not been as bad as it could have been, and periodically Wendy would wonder why. There were times, clear now in her memory, when one or the other of her elders might be about to scold her, and then, suddenly turn away as though nothing had happened.

It had bothered her cousin Gilbert even more, for he was in no such privileged category; and their growing up had been a growing apart. Even now, after an absence of a few years, she was not sure that her cousin, four years older than she and now twenty-six, would be at all happy to see her.

Would any of them, really?

She had never seen much of her uncle, and her aunt had functioned more as a governess than a mother. The only one of the three she remembered with any fondness at all was her uncle, because of the outlandish tricks and jokes he would sometimes perform. That, and the fact that he more than anyone else seemed to realize how alone she was, set him apart from her aunt and cousin and the rest of the town.

And then even he had disappointed her.

At the back of Wendy's mind, the memories of those last few months in Blackwood and of the odd emotions that rose and knifed through the decaying cluster of streets and houses, clamored for release.

No, thought Wendy, *New York is soon enough.*

"I know it's an idiot question, but is your uncle named Edward Markham?"

The question from nowhere burst her reveries like a bubble, and she started involuntarily.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." Wendy looked up, to discover that the voice belonged to a young man—a very interesting looking young man, with close-cut but somewhat theatrically-styled hair and very clear blue eyes.

The eyes held a pleasant gaze, with a hint of a twinkle.

"No—no, that's all right," said Wendy. "It's just that I was sort of daydreaming in another world," she smiled, "and you brought me back to this one rather suddenly."

His smile was light, but the eyes were serious. "From the expression I saw on your face before I spoke, maybe this world's better for you."

"You may be right—as Mencken used to say to everyone." For a moment her expression was somber again, but then she smiled again and added, "yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes," Wendy repeated.

"Yes what?—oh, yes to my question. I'd forgotten about it, it's been so long."

"Well, I have one for you," said Wendy. "How did you happen to ask it—unless you go around asking everyone if they're related to my uncle?"

"Hold on a second. My name is Todd—Todd Raymond."

"And mine is—"

"Wendy Markham," he completed. "Uh—the way this all started is sort of roundabout. I'd seen you up here a couple of hours ago, and a little while ago when I saw you again I got sort of curious, so I asked the purser who you were. When he told me I was sort of surprised, since it had come up just a few weeks before while I was talking with a friend; anyway, I didn't figure there could be too many Wendy Markhams of the right age, so I—"

"So you still haven't told me anything I could call an answer," said Wendy, "although I must admit that you seem to be pretty well informed, Mr. Raymond."

He gestured at the adjoining deck chair. "May I?"

Wendy nodded and Todd Raymond sat down, swinging his legs up onto the footrest. "Todd is much easier to say," he continued, "only one syllable."

"All right, Todd," Wendy replied. "What

else do you know about me?" Todd Raymond seemed a pleasant enough young man, and Wendy was glad of anything to keep her from thinking her own private thoughts, at this particular moment.

Todd looked at her curiously. "I guess I don't *know* anything, really, except that you've lived with your aunt and uncle since you were little, until a few years ago, and that you've been studying in London since then." At Wendy's surprised look Todd explained, "You're wearing a school ring for the School of Scenic and Fashion Arts—you'd have to have been there at least three years to get it."

"You're quite observant," said Wendy, not adding that he had only answered part of her question.

"Part of my job," said Todd, "such as it is."

Wendy found herself suddenly becoming very interested in finding out about this young man, and not sure whether she was happy about it.

"And what, if I might ask, is your job?"

Todd looked at her. "I'm temporary leg man for a genius."

"Thank you," said Wendy. "Just think, if I hadn't asked it wouldn't all be clear to me now. You've—"

Todd raised a hand. "Sorry, I didn't really mean to be obscure, but it's a habit I guess I've picked up from the good Doctor." He paused to

light a cigarette. "He's not a medical doctor, although I wouldn't be positive of that; but I know he's got degrees in everything from anthropology to criminology, and if he wanted to he could put half the alphabet after his name. Officially, I suppose you'd have to classify him as an educator —he writes quite a bit, and lectures at universities fairly often—on whatever happens to strike his fancy—but I'm not involved in that part of it."

Wendy looked at Todd with mock exasperation, and he hurriedly continued, "I've only been working for the Doctor for a few months, and he's kept me hopping most of the time, usually looking for things without the faintest reason why. Now, for example, I'm just coming back from attending a murder trial at the Old Bailey in London. It was a poison case, and I had to sit through five weeks of it to hear four minutes of testimony."

"But—what on earth for?" asked Wendy.

"I'm damned if I know," answered Todd, "but he thought it was important enough to send me clear across the ocean to get. He told me it was connected with a case in New York City, but—"

"I'm afraid you've made me as confused about your job as you seem to be," said Wendy teasingly.

"I suppose I deserve all this," said Todd, "but

it isn't that complicated, really. Y'see, the Doctor only employs me for research and legwork on one subject, and—"

"I hate to keep interrupting," said Wendy, "but I'd like to ask two questions. One: *who* is this doctor?, and *Two:* what is this subject you're talking about?"

She may have imagined it—Wendy was not sure—but it seemed that Todd hesitated before he finally answered.

"His name," he finally said slowly, "is Doctor Claudius Nine, and his subject is murder."

CHAPTER TWO

TODD'S EXPRESSION was still neutral, and Wendy couldn't read anything into the statement, but his conversation was beginning to disturb her.

Murder . . .

And again her thoughts whistled back to the dying town and to the twitterings of the spiteful and malicious, the ugly rumors about . . .

"No."

Wendy knew that she must not let her mind dwell on the past, on the ugliness that had come to the surface of Blackwood like dark mud stirred by a stick to the surface of a calm pond, to spread and blacken.

The stick had been a murder, and its probings had been the signal for an orgy of hatred and jealousy, and a triumph of small minds that had left her no recourse but departure.

Below them, the metallic sea crackled and slapped; and the stars, like horses on the carousel

of eternity, wheeled about Polaris while their reflections in the water below burst like exploding galaxies into numberless points of light.

But for the sea, the only sounds were the drumming of the ship's powerful engines and, occasionally, a clink of glass or a peal of laughter.

"Are you particularly sensitive to that word?" Todd asked finally.

"No, no, it's just—" Wendy hesitated, "it's just that you sort of set my mind wandering—you—reminded me of something," she finished lamely.

"Something you would rather have forgotten."

Wendy nodded. "I suppose so, but it seems that things we most want to forget are the things that stay with us forever."

Todd smiled. "You don't seem old enough to have tasted more than a small part of forever. Maybe you should give things a chance."

"Well, it's been a few years," said Wendy defensively.

"Since what?" said Todd, but before Wendy could speak he raised a hand. "Pardon me. You see what working for Dr. Nine does to me. I start behaving like I've taken silk."

"Taken silk?" echoed Wendy. "I've heard of taking opium but . . ."

Todd laughed. "Your mind is a little more Sax Rohmerish than I'd have expected. 'Taking silk,' me dear, is an expression used in the En-

glish courts—in the robing rooms, anyway—and it simply has to do with getting a silk court robe when you become a Queen's Counsel. It really wasn't worth all this explanation, which I am positive you found fascinating."

"As a matter of fact," said Wendy, "I did." She really was stretching a point just the teensiest bit, but after all, Todd was nice, and he seemed to enjoy her company without having designs on her. It was a pleasant change after all the wolves in London—and New York, for that matter.

"Now at this point," Wendy continued, "if someone wanted to read my thoughts, they wouldn't have a great deal of trouble. It *is* dinnertime, isn't it?"

Todd jumped up. "Say," he exclaimed, "I just had a wonderful idea! Why don't we go in and have some dinner?"

"How nice of you to think of it," laughed Wendy.

For the next few days Wendy thought no more about the letter from Blackwood. Todd Raymond was the most fascinating man she'd ever met, absolutely faultless and a paragon on any level you cared to name, and if you had expressed doubt in this analysis of him you would have best been prepared for trouble.

They talked of several things, and Todd seemed aware of the things that might bother Wendy; he

avoided discussing them, sensing them with an almost telepathic instinct. This empathy was one of the things that made Wendy sure—she never knew when, exactly—that she was falling in love with Todd.

It was a pleasant realization, for the most part, especially for a girl who had thought at various times that she was fated never to fall in love. Up to now, she had to admit, it had been true. Oh, of course, there had been the usual crushes, even under the eyes of her aunt and uncle, but she had always known them as momentary romances, even in the midst of them. And then . . .

Not then, *now*. What should she tell Todd? It was a decision that would have to be made soon, for the ship would be entering New York harbor before the next day was past. Wendy paced her cabin during a good deal of the afternoon, trying to think only of the present, and the problem it presented, but it was an impossible thing. There was no way to order the present without first facing the past—the past and Katy Campbell.

There.

Now that she had let the name come back to her mind it did not seem as strange and dark as it had; it might well have been, she thought, that there had been no need to fight it so, to try to keep it locked in a gray cell of the mind to which, if she tried, she could lose the key. Now she would think of things past, as much as she could,

and try to face what they had meant, and would mean now—to her and to Todd.

Katy Campbell.

The High Priestess.

It was difficult, now, to try to remember the details of much of what had happened. For so long Wendy had tried to suppress them, to imagine that Blackwood and Katy Campbell were parts of a bad dream, jumbled up and puzzling, and now she found that she had to strain to get clear in her mind just what had occurred.

There had been several in Blackwood who knew about Katy Campbell, and the more charitable of these (as they thought themselves) called her a victim of circumstance. The less charitable called her other things.

It was said that she had been orphaned at the age of seven when her parents had died in an auto accident, only a few months after their purchase of stately Shoscombe Manor. The old place had been well cared for, and apparently a respectable sum had been left for its upkeep; the girl was raised there by a guardian, presumably named in the will.

It was said . . .

Apparently . . .

Presumably . . .

Yet the words had to be used, for no one had really known anything about Katy Campbell's

youth, or the circumstances that led to her situation; but she moved through a veil of rumor and speculation, a veil that could easily have become a shroud.

Her mysterious arrival, her hermitlike existence on the estate—the guardian tutored her, and she did not attend public school. Katy Campbell seemed, moreover, quite content with the life she was leading, and never throughout her childhood and adolescence sought out the company of others her own age. She could be seen, occasionally, under a tree perusing a book almost as large as herself, or wandering through the fields behind the house, a faraway expression on her face.

When she reached twenty-one, Katy Campbell dismissed the guardian (with quite a handsome sum but not even a handshake), and continued to live in the old house alone.

And now the rumors were so all-pervading that they began to reach Wendy's ten-year-old ears, the first that she had ever heard of one who, like herself, had been without anyone to call mother and father—and mean it. For this alone Wendy had had to meet her, to find someone who could understand something of how she felt in the ever-alien halls of Markham House.

There were other things said about Katy Campbell, some of them so odd that Wendy didn't even understand them—but one that seemed to come up continually was that she was a witch. Wendy

didn't believe this; she had a picture-book of mythology and folk-tales, and it showed plain as day that witches were ugly, but most everyone said that Katy Campbell was beautiful.

Four years went by, however, between thought and action, and during this time the rumors about the solitary occupant of Shoscombe Manor did not abate. There was a graveyard, a very ancient burying ground, at the edge of the manor, and there were those who said they had seen her wandering about amongst the crumbling stones, during the fall nights. Wendy, on an instinctive level, believed little of what she had heard about Katy Campbell, except the undeniable fact that she lived alone. And so, late in October, the fourteen-year-old girl slipped out one night, along the hall and down the broad front stairs.

The door banged slightly as she closed it, jerked by the wind, and for a moment her heartbeats echoed it. No sound came from within, however, and after she recovered herself Wendy moved quietly out to the road and toward Shoscombe Manor.

She really didn't know what she expected to find; but she was sure that it would be different from what she had been told.

The air was crisp and a little chilly—she wished she had brought a sweater—and the cold light of the radiant full moon made the blue world beneath it seem even chillier than it was. Far off,

the clock of an ancient steeple began to strike the hour, and Wendy counted the strokes as she hurried along the dark sidewalks.

Midnight.

Suppose Katy Campbell really *was* a witch? Suppose she would kidnap Wendy, and . . . no. Wendy caught herself, and sternly reminded the fear within her that she was not like the old women of the town—not like the ones she hated.

This late, she didn't expect to meet anyone on the streets, and was not surprised to be able to make her way to the edge of town and the old manor house without being seen. There were a few lights in the gambrel-roofed old building, and somewhere was playing a recording of Mozart's Moonlight Sonata.

How appropriate, she thought.

Wendy knew that Katy Campbell kept no pets, not even a black cat (she smiled to herself), so there was no watchdog to worry about. She walked up the gravel path toward the house, not quite certain what she was going to do but pulled on by a sense of something that had to be done.

At the last moment Wendy turned from the steps to the front door—perhaps it would be better, she rationalized, to see if there were anyone outside first. She moved along the walk beside the hedgerows that led slantingly down toward the broad field at the rear of the house.

Here there were few lights. Far off to the right

was the main highway, and from time to time there was a faint flicker of headlights and a distant rumbling as giant deisel trucks rolled through the night toward their unknown destinations, but except for this all was quite silent and dark.

Wendy looked about her and sighed. Now that she was here she was not only a little scared but also puzzled. Why had she come, what could she do now? She couldn't just walk up to the door at this time of night and—

"Hello, my dear. You're Wendy, aren't you?"

Wendy spun around, for she had heard nothing, not even the cracking of a twig.

Katy Campbell, the woman they called the High Priestess, stood a few feet away from her. She wore a robe of crimson silk belted with a black sash, and her feet were bare. Indeed, it seemed evident that the robe was all she wore.

In the brilliant moonlight, the woman's green eyes and red hair took on an unearthly aspect that seemed at odds with her pleasant expression, and it would have been very easy to be frightened by her. Wendy didn't know quite why, but she was not frightened—not at all.

"How—how do you know my name?"

Katy Campbell smiled, and Wendy, looking at her, thought that she had never seen anyone so beautiful. "Because," said Katy, "I know a great deal about this town. Just because they

know nothing about me it doesn't work both ways. I know, for instance, that you're an orphan like—like I was, I know that you have an uncle who fiddles with magic tricks and an aunt who can't cook, and I know that you're a little brighter than most of the people in Blackwood."

Wendy was having a little trouble finding her voice, but she managed it. "Why do you say that about me, Miss—Katy?"

"Better," said Katy, gripping her hand. "I know that if you were like them you'd believe what some people say, and if that were so you never would have come here to see me." Her eyes grew gentle. "I think I could guess why you came here, too."

Wendy still held Katy's hand. "W-why?" she stammered.

"Because you're like me—alone—and you want to know how to live with it, or even if it's worth it."

So what Wendy had hoped had been true, and Katy had understood, and in the next moment Katy held her while she sobbed out the tears that had waited since the day her father had died, waited for the time when they could be shed. The day had come.

Later, they sat in the great central dining room of the Manor House, and talked for a long time. Katy seemed to know her every thought and dream, and even more important seemed to un-

derstand the frustrations that had walled in those tears for so long. Then they went to the kitchen for a middle of the night tea, and after that took her on a grand tour of the house.

In several rooms there were still closets full of clothes, and Wendy tried on a few of the dresses. Katy even let her wear the red silk robe for a bit, but then she was sleepy and the next thing she knew was in bed.

She didn't wake up until late the next morning, and she found an apologetic note from Katy:

Wendy

I had to leave early to see someone down in NYC. I should be back by late this evening but if I were you I wouldn't wait. Perhaps if you tell you aunt and uncle that you went out early this morning they won't be too hard on you. Sorry I couldn't wake you up.

Affectionately,
KATY

Wendy had gone home in a fresh, happy mood, and even the question of her aunt and uncle were no bother to evade. It had been the beginning of a long friendship, one that would last up to the final horrible day when Wendy could stand the town of Blackwood no longer.

There was a sharp knock at the stateroom door,

and Wendy recognized it as Todd's. She smiled ruefully at herself as she checked her appearance in the mirror. She had become so involved in her reverie that she had forgotten that its whole purpose was to make a decision. Now she would have to make that decision in the here-and-now.

Todd smiled, but to Wendy there seemed to be something more in his face, a hint of worry perhaps. "I was beginning to wonder whether you'd forgotten about me," he said. "I've been waiting down in that lounge since the beginning of time."

"Oh, Todd, I'm sorry," Wendy cried, "I just started wool-gathering, I guess, and sort of lost track of time."

"No harm done." Todd sat down in the overstuffed chair and stretched out, but he didn't seem comfortable. "Wendy—there's something I'd like to ask you to do. I guess you could consider it a favor to me."

"To wit?"

Todd hesitated a fraction of a second, and then spoke. "I'd like you to talk to Dr. Nine before you go up to Blackwood. I know he's been in touch with someone up there from time to time —maybe even with your uncle, I'm not sure. In any case he might have some ideas on what's going on, what the situation is there, and it wouldn't do you any harm to get in touch with him."

Wendy sat down in Todd's lap and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Of course I will, if you think it will help. My, you seem to be even more bothered than I am about my going up there. I told you before that I didn't intend to stay any longer than I absolutely had to. I don't see what you're fretting about."

"Well," said Todd, "I must admit that it's not exactly a one-sided thing. I'm pretty sure that Dr. Nine would want to talk to you anyway. He's always been interested in it, not just because of the murder-case, either. He's particularly interested in the other intriguing aspect of life in the happy little town of Blackwood—the witchcult."

"The witchcult." Wendy echoed the words in a completely expressionless and neutral tone.

"Yes," said Todd, looking at her intently. "Matter of fact, he knows the leader of the cult pretty well. It's a woman named Katy Campbell."

CHAPTER THREE

"To Dr. Nine she was always *the* woman. Read up whole libraries on witchcraft, he told me once, but never found anything that would really identify her as a dyed-in-the-wool witch," Todd was saying. "Still, that's the way everyone seems to think of her, and Dr. Nine says that she's—"

"Says that she's WHAT?" snapped Wendy, surprised herself at the coldness in her voice.

Todd looked at her a moment before replying. "I'm sorry if I struck a nerve. Twas a fault unwilling. I was just going to say that—Dr. Nine feels that whatever the truth may be, there are a lot of things hidden away inside her that she is not about to tell anyone, that's all." He continued to look at Wendy, and waited for her to speak.

"I—I'm sorry I jumped on you like that," she said finally. "It's just that it almost sounded like

the kind of thing I left Blackwood to try to avoid. Forgive?"

"Forgive."

"Todd, there's something that I have to discuss with you. Another part of the reason I got upset just now was that it has a little to do with Katy Campbell. Ordinarily it wouldn't matter, but we don't feel ordinary toward each other any more, do we?"

"Most definitely not," affirmed Todd. "I will prove it."

And prove it he did, with a kiss that left Wendy a little breathless.

"Wow," she said finally, breaking away, "You'd better hold off with that kind of artillery or I'll have the Captain down here with his little Book."

"Perish forbid," said Todd with an expression of mock horror. "Anyway," he continued, "you were going to say?"

"I was going to say certain things, but I think it would be better if we wait until tomorrow night. Then we'll go to see your Dr. Nine, and maybe I'll be able to kill two birds with one stone."

"That's one way of putting it," said Todd.

Dr. Claudius Nine, Ph.D., F.R.M.S., D. Litt., and quite a bit more of the alphabet, leaned back

in the embroidered leather desk chair and regarded his guests with some interest.

The study, most spacious of the rooms in Dr. Nine's brown-stone in the West Seventies off Central Park, was in what could only be described as monumental disorder. Piles of books stood at precarious angles on tables, chairs, and leaning up against the walls. There were prints crowded on the walls, too, in the rare spaces not taken up by bookcases, and like the books they seemed to have been quite successful at avoiding a dustrag.

At one end of the room was a large brick fireplace, and to one side of it was a huge leather-topped desk. Between the two was the chair in which sat Dr. Nine, and on the other side of the fireplace his young assistant sat at one end of a plush couch.

Wendy Markham sat at the other end, and regarded both men with a slightly suspicious air.

She had not talked a great deal during the dinner of molten curry, and she intended to keep things this way as long as possible—after all, she had no real obligation to volunteer any information. Still—

It was quite probable that Dr. Nine, especially if he had been keeping in touch with Katy Campbell, would have a little information that could help her. Why, for instance, was it so important that she come up to Blackwood now? Certainly

not just because she was coming back to the States; no, they would have known better than that.

There must be another reason, something that her aunt wouldn't—or couldn't—put into a letter.

"About Katy Campbell," began Dr. Nine, and Wendy fixed him with an almost frighteningly intense stare. The Doctor seemed fussed and made an impatient gesture. His face, with its clear blue eyes and high forehead, had been as expressionless as a cigar-store indian for some time; but now he seemed genuinely disturbed.

"Please understand me, dear lady," said Dr. Nine in an earnest tone. "I, more than most people you will meet, have no axes to grind, particularly as regards Blackwood and your very good friend Miss Campbell. Todd may have told you, as a matter of fact, that I am acquainted with Miss Campbell—even that I knew of your first meeting with her before anyone else. It was me she came to see that day, you know."

"You?" Wendy was taken by surprise. So many memories that she had thought dark secrets seemed as open as daylight. "Why did she—"

"I'm afraid that at this point I may not reveal that to you. I have promised Miss Campbell not to discuss it, so you'll have to ask her, if she'll see you. Wait!" He held up a hand to

forestall Wendy's objection. "If that sounds strange to you I can tell you only that there are a number of strange things going on up in Blackwood. But a question: you honestly can think of no reason why your uncle would want to see you?"

"Not considering the way I left before, no," Wendy answered, "but—oh, all right, I'll wait until I get up there. When the ship docked this morning I called Markham House first thing, and my cousin Gilbert answered. He didn't seem very enthusiastic about talking to me at all—almost as though I'd only left the day before or something, there was still a real contempt in his voice. But when my uncle got on the line he seemed very cheerful and—and relieved, but I don't know about what."

"And you asked him why your presence in Blackwood was required?" prompted Dr. Nine.

"Yes, but he didn't seem to have heard me. He just kept talking about how important it was that I come up and—"

She stopped.

Her hand rested on the faded plush of the sofa, and Todd touched it lightly. "Did you remember something," he asked, "something that your uncle said that might have a particular meaning?"

"I'm not sure," said Wendy. The conversation had been so rushed, and perhaps it had just

been a meaningless comment of the type people will make to keep a conversation going—her uncle *had* been trying to get her interest up, and at times had been merely chattering. "It was something like, 'You'll have to see things up here to believe the situation' and 'I want someone up here that I can trust to tell the truth.' Right together, like that, and—his voice sounded sort of odd when he said that."

Dr. Nine leaned back again and swiveled his chair to watch the glowing logs. The embers gave his face and the nimbus of white curly hair a satanic tinge, and behind him the wood of the bookcase glowed dully. "Wendy, d'you trust your uncle?"

The question was unexpected but Wendy's voice was level as she answered.

"Yes, I trust my uncle. I don't think he'd do anything to decieve me."

The effect of her words was rather surprising. Dr. Nine suddenly burst into an explosion of laughter. It was quickly gone, but the smile remained on his face as he turned back to look at her. "I thought you once told me that your uncle had a hobby of magic."

Wendy was completely puzzled. "I may have, yes, but I don't see what connection that might have with—"

"I'm sorry," said Dr. Nine. The smile was still on his face, but Wendy noted that a new

emotion had joined it, a kind of curious concentration. "But there are aspects of this thing that seem to be pointing in certain directions that I can only guess at. Todd."

"Yes, sir?" Wendy had been aware that Todd didn't say much around Dr. Nine, and at first she had thought it was because of the employer-employee relationship, but as the evening had gone on it became evident that Dr. Nine considered Todd more a student than a workman, and while discussing a fine point on some subject he would sometimes turn to Todd for his opinion, in a sort of testing manner.

"I think it would be wise," said Dr. Nine." if you were to go up to Markham House with Miss Markham. No, not with her," he corrected himself, "better go along a bit later, a few hours. Since you two have been—getting along—so well, it's understandable that she might want you to meet her uncle."

"Could I ask why you think that's necessary?" Wendy interrupted. Dr. Nine seemed to be finding even more unpleasantness than she had expected. "I mean, I'd like very much to have Todd near me," (the two exchanged a glance while Dr. Nine stared at the ceiling) "but there really isn't any danger, is there?"

Dr. Nine studied his pipe for several seconds before he answered. Finally he said, "I'm not sure. Perhaps not, but there is little sense in tak-

ing chances. Actually, I have to admit that I'm not as worried about you as I am about someone else."

"Who?" breathed Wendy.

"Someone who might not wait for trouble and danger to come to her—Katy Campbell."

Twenty-four hours later, Wendy was still thinking about those words of Dr. Nine, as she drove along the secondary highway that connected the Thruway with Blackwood.

Katy in danger? It seemed odd. Oh. there had always been a prejudice against Katy Campbell —ignorance that resulted in mumblings and, toward the end of Wendy's years there, in open accusations of the wildest kind, but—

But Katy had ignored them. If God could suffer a witch to live then she could suffer fools, she had once said to Wendy while they swam in the stream that ran through Shoscombe Manor's woods. Later, while they had dried each other, Katy had told her that anyone who chose to be different had to expect the howling of the mob, of the beast with no head, and that if it became too bothersome one always had three choices; fight it, join it, or escape from it.

When the time had come, Wendy had chosen the last.

She was not ashamed, nor was she proud of it. It was simply a decision she had made in the

past, the only one that had then seemed feasible; and the strange emanations that even now were reaching out from Blackwood as she approached seemed to prove her right.

Still, the Doctor's words were not easily forgotten.

"You know, Wendy," he had said, "Miss Campbell wasn't as patient with the townspeople as you seem to think. That witchcult business, now—she really got the thing going, and some of the less socially acceptable types of people in Blackwood were attracted to it. The thing is still going, to a degree, and she's even less popular with the town than she was before. Now," a cloud of pipe smoke began to gather above his chair, "I'm not saying that she has anything to do with this summons from your uncle; but for some time now, even before your relatives found out you were socializing with her, the situation was strained between them."

"Between Uncle Edward and Katy? But I didn't even know they'd—"

"No, I rather doubted that Katy Campbell would have mentioned it to you. She—knew your father."

Wendy was surprised but tried not to show it. "W-well? Suppose she did? My father knew a few people in Blackwood besides my uncle and aunt."

"True," Dr. Nine affirmed. "But after your

father died, rumors began to circulate that—sorry to have to spring things at you so quickly—that his death hadn't been accidental, and that Katy Campbell knew something about it."

Pause.

The effect of the plainly spoken words had been indescribable, in the feeling they had given Wendy. She could only think of a day in her childhood when she had reached out to pet a cute spaniel puppy and the dog had snarled and snapped at her. It was simply the unexpected viciousness of the idea that frightened and sickened her.

"Of course," continued the Doctor, "they *were* only rumors, and after a time they died out. I doubt, however, that any of the major parties to the situation have buried the memories entirely."

"But my uncle—" began Wendy.

Dr. Nine raised a hand. "Your uncle, young lady, may have faults, such as his penchant for jokes and hoaxing, along with his magic, but he is not one of prejudge. From what I've heard—not a great deal—these days he considers Katy Campbell a fraud, more or less—a hoaxer like himself."

"Dr. Nine," Wendy had asked hopefully, "do you think that this whole business of my having to go up to Blackwood could be like that? A hoax, I mean?"

And Dr. Nine had looked at her with a curious

expression in his eyes. "I don't know, child," he had said, "but let's hope so."

It was twilight now. Wendy switched on the headlights and took her bearings. She was only a few miles from Blackwood now, and would reach it before total darkness had set in. On either side of the road was a thin border of elms, and beyond them were orchards. Wendy slowed to let a car filled with shouting teenagers swing by, and as she did she glanced at the activity in the groves.

Smudge pots were burning and electric lights had been strung up on poles and scaffolds. Workers were standing on low platforms beside the trees, some holding sickles and pruning hooks, others with poles equipped with running loops to get fruit from the higher branches. Wendy had played here—and in the other orchards around the village—for much of her childhood; and she knew how, after the feverish activity of getting in the crop, there would be the cider party.

Oh, if only she could have come up here without the riddles that weighted her down!

But, as the car passed the first houses, and the Blackwood she remembered began to surround her, Wendy knew that she was not going to be able to deal with things cooly and rationally, as Dr. Nine had warned her she must.

The town was too heavy with an atmosphere

of evil, a scent of hidden things that was as real as smoke, and as impalpable. During her years in England she had thought that this aura was simply something that she had built up inside herself, but now she knew that she had been too hard on herself. It was there, as it had always been there.

She turned in at Angel Street, and as the car moved inexorably toward the great house at the road's end she found that she was barely breathing, afraid that the sound might awaken the slumbering evil that had brought her here.

CHAPTER FOUR

DARKNESS LAY ON Markham House, but one could read its history from the bulk of the structure alone. When first built it had been a large, boxlike main structure winged at each side; but early in its history one of the wings had been burned to the ground. The rest of the house had been saved but the wound had been walled over and the wing had never been rebuilt.

Behind the house, and very close to the rear wall of the main building, was a small stone tower, the lone remaining evidence of a private chapel—unless one studied the scene carefully and saw the ancient gravestones beyond the tower, rough-hewn marble slabs that stood at odd angles like unhealthy teeth.

Wendy could have described everything to the smallest detail with her eyes shut, for this had been home to her for the longest uninterrupted period in her life, home though without mother or father. She knew how many steps there were

on the broad central staircase, how many posts in the curving oak banisters.

I know this house so well, she was thinking as she parked the car and took her suitcases from the trunk, *if only I knew the people inside half so thoroughly.*

Only a few lights showed here and there along the front of the house, and these, like candles held behind sheets of ice, did nothing to remove the feeling of arctic remoteness. Wendy had been wondering, absently, whether Markham House would still seem so suffocating, and now, as she mounted the stone steps to the porch, she knew more than ever that nothing had changed. Already it seemed difficult to breathe, and she actually had to force herself to ring the bell.

At each side of this door were long, narrow windows, but the view within was obscured by lace curtains. After a rather lengthy wait Wendy noted a movement inside, and then the sound of the door unlocking. This seemed strange, for during Wendy's years under the Markham roof the doors had only been secured when they were out of town. Perhaps this was one of the first indications as to how things had changed.

". . . Wendy?"

Agnes Markham stood in the doorway. In her late forties, she was of medium height, but a thin body and long face gave her the illusion of being much taller. She was wearing a faded white

blouse and nondescript, wrinkled skirt. Except for deepening lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth, and a slight graying of her hair, she was exactly as Wendy had remembered her.

For several seconds Wendy just stood there, unable to say anything. Their parting, so long before, had been such a sick, unhappy event that it was difficult to think how to approach a beginning of communication again.

Finally Agnes Markham spoke again. "Wendy," she said, trying to keep her voice neutral and not quite succeeding, "I'm so glad that you could come. Edward isn't home at the moment, but he should be back before long. Let me help you with—"

"No," Wendy said suddenly, not knowing why. "No, I can manage." She brought the suitcases into the front hall and set them down at the foot of the staircase. She turned to face her aunt.

"I'm sorry if I sounded abrupt just then," Wendy apologized. "It's been rather a long trip and I haven't had much chance to rest since yesterday."

She decided now that she would not mention her visit with Dr. Nine to anyone just yet—except Katy Campbell. "When did you say uncle would be back?"

Agnes Markham studied her with a curious intensity for a moment. "I expect him back very soon," she answered. "We're having guests for

dinner—other guests than yourself, my dear—and I'm sure he won't want to be late."

There was a curious sound to this. "Oh? Who else will be here?"

The older woman seemed a shade impatient. Now that it was obvious that there was no emotional tie left between them, she seemed to be willing to observe only perfunctory sociability. "Friends of your uncle," she answered, "Mr. Saint from the city, Dr. Osbourne—oh, yes, and a friend of yours, Miss Campbell."

There was no emotion in her voice but Wendy saw a flicker of malice behind the grey eyes. "Miss—Campbell?" echoed Wendy. Perhaps it was merely some sort of joke, and—

No.

She had never known Agnes Markham to joke, not once in all the time she had spent at Markham House. Her aunt was as opposed to jokes as her uncle was fond of them. This was not a joke.

Agnes Markham only nodded. "Dinner," she continued, as though she had said nothing out of the way, "will be at eight o'clock." Her voice was again quite neutral. "I must get back to the kitchen. Now you just make yourself at home."

Make yourself at home.

The words burned and hissed against Wendy's emotions like acid against a painting. If, she thought grimly, she had never once throughout all her childhood and adolescence been able to

think of Markham House as home, then how mocking and malicious the words seemed now.

Steady.

Wendy tried to tell herself that she was being too hard on Agnes, too quick to look for evil. Her aunt had never known that much of what went on in her mind, and it was doubtful that she had meant the words just uttered to sting and hurt.

Dimly Wendy sensed that she was alone in the hall. On either side of her were the broad oak railings of the main staircase. At the top of the stairs, and directly facing them, was a large door that led, Wendy knew, to her uncle's study. The hinges of the door gleamed strangely in the tiny fragments of light from the cut-glass chandelier above her. The points of light moved and shivered in a slight draft, like frightened stars.

At each side, the railings led back and around in a horseshoe design above the stairs. At one time these balcony-like halls had given access to the upper floors of each wing, but now only those on the right were in use. The doors on the left, while still operable, opened only onto solid brick, where the missing wing had been walled over.

Wendy took her bags to the top of the stairs. Later she would search out her aunt again and find out which room was to be hers, but for now she had no real desire to explore again. Would they put her back in "her" room? Suddenly

Wendy felt as though she had been running in a long race, a race that had lasted for years, and was bone-weary in every muscle. It was only a psychological reaction, she knew, but if it had begun already how much of it would she be able to take? Suddenly she wished she had disregarded everyone's advice. What could Todd and Dr. Nine know of the situation up here? It was simply a family, if one could call it that, that had become so involved in its own fussings and plottings that it had been ready to drink up any stupid suspicion or rumor, like . . .

". . . his death hadn't been accidental, and that Katy Campbell knew something about it . . ."

Suddenly dizzy, Wendy reached out to the study door to steady herself.

The knob slipped from her hand and the door swung open. The room was empty. Weakly, Wendy made her way inside and dropped down on a leather footstool. As she tried to recover from the queasy feeling that had overcome her at remembrance of Dr. Nine's words, she looked about the room.

It was much as she remembered it. On your left as you entered was the first of the two massive bookcases that filled up one whole wall except for the fireplace that separated them. Facing the fireplace, across the room, was the heavy and

boxlike desk. Its red leather top matched the covering of the padded desk chair behind it.

On the edge of the desk nearest her was a pile of cylindrical objects wrapped in cellophane. It took Wendy a moment to remember what they were, for it had almost slipped her mind that her uncle had become diabetic shortly before she left Blackwood, and these hypodermic needles had become a part of his daily routine.

Directly opposite the door to the hall was a window, the only one in the room. It was square rather than rectangular, and through it, since the room was dark, Wendy could see the stone tower, whose iron-barred window faced that of the house from a distance of ten feet.

Dully, her mind refusing to concentrate on anything of importance, Wendy got to her feet and turned on the green desk lamp. The soft light gleamed on the polished wood of the floor and the brass fixtures of the fireplace, and a thin wisp of smoke trailed up from a still-smoldering log resting on its iron supports.

In the corner nearest the door and the inside wall was a huge, ancient wardrobe cabinet, its door open to show the neatly hung clothes within. A single pair of brown oxfords, which looked as though they had been made twenty years before, lay on the bottom of the cabinet, and for a moment Wendy puzzled about them. They were far

too small for Uncle Edward, and hopelessly out of date—why—?

And then she realized why that odd twinge had passed through her at the sight of them, sitting there all by themselves. They were not her uncle's shoes at all; they had belonged to her father. He had worn them, as a matter of fact, the last time she had ever seen him, before the—accident.

It seemed very unlike her uncle to keep something like that; he had never had a very sentimental nature, and *shoes* of all things. Suddenly Wendy knew she had to get out of that room, out of Markham House, before the wall of riddles fell and crushed her beneath it.

Her aunt was nowhere to be seen, and most likely was still in the kitchen preparing dinner. Before, Wendy might have considered going to help her with the meal, but now her only thought was to get out from under this suffocating roof.

Wendy closed the door silently and turned up along the sidewalk. Blackwood had not improved its streets with lamps since she had been here last, and the only illumination was a filtered webwork of moonlight through the dense leaves of the oaks that lined the avenue.

She was not conscious, really, of the direction of her steps, and walked for some time without any definite sense of direction. Her mind was racing with a jumble of thoughts, and none of them seemed to make any sense.

Far off, beyond slate rooftops and smoking chimneys, a bell in the steeple of some unknown church began to toll.

One, two . . .

Why had she paid any attention to her uncle's wishes? It was not as though she owed them anything.

Three, four . . .

She was probably just manufacturing phantoms—and riddles; there was nothing to be worried about here.

Five, six . . .

And Dr. Nine! *He* certainly hadn't helped any! Especially with that comment of his about Katy Campbell . . .

Seven, the bell tolled, and a different note chimed the half-hour.

And Wendy suddenly realized where she was going. Only a short distance ahead of her lay Shoscombe Manor; all this time, as she walked, her subconscious had guided her to the House of the High Priestess.

Katy Campbell had been in her thoughts often since she had left Blackwood, and Wendy had often wondered whether Katy had thought of her. Well, she was supposed to come over for dinner, anyway, and this was enough excuse for the intrusion.

Wendy was hoping, however, that Katy wouldn't think of it as an intrusion.

The lights were not on at the front of the house, and there was no sign of life from within. As she had so many years before, Wendy walked around the side of the manor building and down the slope toward the field beyond.

And then she heard a sound which she had almost forgotten, the tinkling of a tiny brass bell. It was the bell that Katy had used in some of the rituals she had shown Wendy—"a religious service, not a spell or a hex,"—and the sound came from off to the left as she faced out to the end of the field.

It came from the tiny chapel within the graveyard on the manor property.

Now, as Wendy walked toward it, she could see a flickering light on the frosted glass of the windows, and, muffled, the sound of a soft low voice chanting.

The place had been called by the townspeople 'The Grey Chapel' for so long a time that no one now knew how the name had come about. It had been built at least a century before Shoscombe Manor itself, and the graveyard was even older. It lay at the edge of the property, and a heavy iron gate, now long since rusted closed, led to a path to the road. Moss and vines crept across the stones that had fallen as well as the ones still standing, and it had sometimes seemed to Wendy as though the land were trying to swallow up the

graveyard and erase any sign that it had ever existed.

For some time Wendy stood uncertainly outside the chapel, not sure whether she should interrupt Katy while the woman was thus involved, but after a while the warm glow of the candlelight within lured her to the threshold.

The door was slightly ajar, and as Wendy slipped inside the blue-robed figure at the altar knelt between two black candles. If she heard Wendy, she gave no sign of it, and the girl made no sound to disturb her.

She watched in silence as Katy went through the final part of the ritual. The priestess knelt at the altar, holding a round black rod in her hands. It was of mahogany, with a rounded and knurled top, and Wendy knew that this was the staff of life in Katy's rituals, and that she used it in many different ways.

Katy said, or rather intoned, a long series of short sentences which were made muffled and unintelligible by the robe, the cowl of which covered even her head, so that Wendy could actually see nothing of Katy herself.

For a horrible moment, Wendy wondered whether the woman at the high altar were some impostor, someone who meant harm to her . . .

But then the figure had risen and turned. Katy Campbell looked across the tiny room at Wendy,

and her green eyes seemed to glitter in the light of the candles.

"So you've returned," she said, without inflection.

She walked over to Wendy with a slow, almost regal gait, as though she were the queen of all the witches and were receiving a royal guest.

"Yes," Wendy said slowly, trying to keep her voice level. "I—I had to see you. They—"

But words were no use now. Wendy buried herself in the arms of the high priestess and sobbed. She didn't know why she was crying; but it was probably a combination of a number of things, of the web of riddles and rumors and unexplained situations. The tension had become too great; and now, as Katy held her tenderly, maternally, the pressure began to ease.

"It's all right, child," Katy's voice soothed. "Cry all you want. It won't hurt." From a pocket within the robe she took a handkerchief and handed it to Wendy, watching with concern while the girl dried her eyes.

Wendy managed to recover herself. "I—I'm sorry," she gasped with the last of the sobs, "I don't know what made me break down like that."

"You don't?" There was a sad smile on Katy's face, with a tinge of gentle mockery. "I wonder. The last time I saw you, lo this long time past, you were crying in very much the same way.

The reason then was the stupidity of a number of people. Those people haven't changed much, and that in itself is a reason to cry."

Wendy smiled a little as she dabbed her face dry. "You live here and I don't see you crying."

"Sweet, I did all my crying a long time ago, before you and I met, as a matter of fact. I learned then that it's only safe to cry when there's someone close who isn't afraid of tear-drops, and—" she hesitated,—"and who won't mark them as a sign of weakness and wait for the next battle."

Her tone of voice was so curious, so bitter, that for a moment Wendy was tempted to ask her to explain, but Katy didn't act as though it were something she would want to discuss.

Wendy decided to shift the subject. "I sort of wandered over here," she said, "and I thought that since you're coming over to Markham House for dinner that—"

Katy cut her words off with a gesture. "Coming over to dinner?"

"Why, yes," Wendy said uncertainly, not sure what was the matter. "I was talking with my aunt and—everything's all right, isn't it?"

Katy smiled, but her eyes still seemed a bit clouded. "Of course. It's just that I'd almost forgotten about it." She looked down at her robe for a moment, and gestured with it to Wendy. "Mm, looks like I'll have to get ready. You—

you had better go on ahead, I don't know how long I'll be."

There was still something odd in Katy's manner, but it was obvious that she wanted Wendy to return to Markham House. At Katy's gesture they walked outside and headed up at a slant toward the front of the manor house.

One question had been throbbing in Wendy's mind since the night before, however; and this one she knew she would have to ask now. There could be no delay.

"Katy," she said above the sussuration of their footsteps through the tall grass. "An odd thing happened. On the way back from England, on the boat, I met this boy—well, man, actually. His name is Todd Raymond and her works for a man named Dr. Claudius Nine. You—you know Dr. Nine?"

Katy stopped, and turned to Wendy. In the brilliant moonlight the priestess' face was a mask of sorrow, and twin gleams at the corners of her eyes bespoke tears only just held in check.

"Yes," Katy said slowly. "Yes, I know the Doctor. Surely that isn't the real question you want to ask?"

Now Wendy was caught; she had no idea what she should do. "I don't want to do anything to hurt you, Katy. If you don't want to—"

"No. It's—all right." The two tears moved down Katy's cheeks, but she seemed not to no-

tice them. "Didn't I just tell you that tears are safe when you're with those you can trust?"

"But I—"

Katy made a rueful little smile. "Don't worry. It's just that there are things that are in the past. I try to keep them there, but it just doesn't seem to work out that way. If only the dead would lie down!"

Katy was obviously in no state to talk about anything—particularly what Wendy wanted to discuss. "It's not important," she said. "I can talk to you about it after dinner, I have to get back there now anyway."

"Yes, there are things for which I must prepare as well." Again that odd tone in Katy's voice. "But I think if you have a question to ask me you'd better ask it now. It just might be that you won't have another chance—that's convenient. After all," Katy continued, "it isn't as though you hadn't asked the question already. You've talked with Dr. Nine, and that means he's told you something of the circumstances around your father's death. He told you—"

"Katy, please—"

"He told you," Katy went on steadily, "that there were rumors. These rumors were to the effect that your father's death wasn't accidental, and that I knew something about it. You want to know if they're true. That's it, isn't it?"

Katy seemed so remote that Wendy was be-

coming frightened. "Yes," she answered, almost in a whisper. "But I didn't really think—"

"That there was anything to it?" Katy smiled. "That's nice of you, Wendy, but it doesn't do much good."

Wendy waited, held by the tension in Katy's voice, a tension so palpable that it made the gentle smile of the priestess seem almost grotesque.

"You see, Wendy," Katy continued, "the rumors that Dr. Nine heard about me—those rumors, anyway—were perfectly true."

Silence.

High above the two motionless figures in the field of whispering grass, a shooting star plunged to fiery dissolution as it sang down through the heavens. It was behind Katy, and she did not see it, but Wendy caught a fleeting glimpse of it from the corner of her eye, and she shuddered.

"Understand what I've said, my child," Katy resumed. "Exactly what I've told you. The rumors, as stated, were true. I don't know who started them; if I did, I'd know enough, perhaps too much." Katy laughed suddenly, a short laugh on the thin edge of hysteria. "Don't read anything more into them than that," she continued with an abrupt return to her normal state. "And, my dear, please remember this. You know me, as few people do; you're the only person I can really depend on that can help me now."

"Help you? But what's wrong?"

"I can't tell you, Wendy. Oh, please believe me, I don't dare risk telling you! You have to trust me, maybe only for a few hours more."

And now Wendy could have wept. She did not, because she knew instinctively that there could be no time for tears now, that all her attention had to be on what Katy told her. A vague dread was beginning to form at the corners of her mind, but she was going to fight it with every bit of will power left in her.

"But Katy," she said, "if you'd only tell me something, just some way I can help. The other thing, the questions about my father—they're in the past, they don't—"

She stopped.

If only the dead would lie down.

"Katy," Wendy cried, her mind spinning, "does this—what's happening now have anything to do with my father, and what happened to him?"

The High Priestess looked at her for several seconds. Her head shook, as though she were trapped in a maze and had given up all hope of getting out now. Gently she touched Wendy's forehead, tracing a five-pointed star with her thumb. Then, so softly Wendy barely felt her lips, she kissed her on the forehead—on the Sign of the Star.

"Yes, Wendy. It concerns your father's death. And if it happens as I suspect, tonight will see the

end of a terrible secret. I only hope that the past does not become the present."

If Wendy had been puzzled before she was on the edge of insanity now. "But you'll be all right?" Underneath the contradictory exterior, Wendy thought, Katy was frightened, and how could Wendy help her unless she knew where the danger lay?

"Don't worry about me, Wendy. Just go back to Markham House and act as though nothing has happened. Whatever you do, don't say a word about having seen me tonight, or talked to me. Now that's very important, Wendy, and I'm depending on you to remember it. It's almost eight, now, and you'll be late as it is. If anyone should ask you where you've been just tell them you wandered around to look at your old memories—that's true in a sense, isn't it?" Now Katy smiled, and the smile was free and reassuring. "I'll be able to explain things later, if all goes well. You must be patient until then. Now off with you, and don't get lost going home."

Wendy walked a few steps and then stopped.

"What's the matter?" asked Katy.

"Nothing. It's just—I'm not going 'home', I'm going back to Markham House." Wendy sighed. "I suppose it doesn't matter; stupid thing to say. But I don't have a home, really; not if the word means anything."

Katy came back over to her. "Yes, child, you

do have a home, whenever you want it. Now—" She turned Wendy around and pointed her toward the road, "—now back to Markham House with you and I'll see you in a while." She stepped back and nodded toward the street. "Go on, now. I'll be all right."

Wendy walked down the gravel driveway without looking back. She knew she would see Katy standing there, watching her until she had disappeared around the bend of the drive as it met the road.

As she walked, she glanced up. The sky was heavy with stars, though many were obscured by the brightness of the Moon. Wendy shuddered again, remembering the shooting star and the meaning given for it in ancient books of divination.

The death of the star foretold the death of a witch.

CHAPTER FIVE

If only, Wendy thought desperately, *I could read just a little more from these stars than that, just enough to know what the next few hours will bring . . .*

Again, far off, came the tolling of the church bell, and if Wendy had not been sure it was her imagination she would have sworn that now its notes were deeper and more funereal.

One.

Wendy began to hurry along the walk: the streets were deserted.

Two.

She still hadn't seen Uncle Edward; would he give her a straight answer to the riddles?

Three.

Wendy crossed the street, and her footsteps seemed to echo in the long, tree-shrouded avenue.

Four.

If only it weren't so dark beneath these trees!

Only a few faint pools of moonlight broke the inky blackness of the path, and Wendy had to watch her footing.

Five.

Suddenly a tree branch bobbed down and Wendy stifled a startled scream. She stood still for a moment, trying to recover her jangled nerves.

Six.

But the echo of her footsteps continued. How could—

Seven.

Suddenly Wendy was running, stumbling through the darkness, and the echoing footsteps sounded behind her, closer and closer.

Eight.

The final stroke of the bell seemed to explode in her brain, and she was falling down through an endless gulf. The side of her head was throbbing, and something was pressing against it, something hard and rough. From a great distance she heard someone calling her name in a deep, rumbling one. The word seemed to echo like the footsteps had, but then it was growing milder, and more *solid,* and . . .

Someone was lifting her head from the sidewalk. She could see only a vague dark shape, and she began to struggle and cry out.

"Wendy. Wendy! It's okay, it's me—Todd Raymond."

As if to confirm this, a branch suddenly shifted above and a shaft of moonlight fell on Todd's handsome young face.

Wendy breathed in relief. "But what were you doing? Were you following me, or chasing me?"

Todd looked at her strangely. "Following you? Why would I have been doing that?"

"Well, I—I don't know, I suppose you weren't," Wendy conceded. "But," she continued, "how did you happen to be there? And why did you run after me like that?"

Todd helped her to her feet. "Can you stand alright?" he asked, "you took a nasty fall." Wendy nodded, and looked at Todd expectantly. "Oh," he smiled, "sorry. I forgot you're the one who always wants her answers right away."

"Wants them and never gets them," replied Wendy as they started walking again. She had bruised a knee and ripped the bottom edge of her dress slightly, but there didn't seem to be any other damage.

"I was there," Todd said, "because I'd gone to look for you. I went to the Markham's, and you weren't there—"

"Did they tell you to look for me around here?" asked Wendy. What if they already knew of her meeting with Katy?

"No. They didn't seem to know much of anything. Your uncle had only just arrived and was complaining about dinner being so early. He was

just about to have a champion donny-brook with his dear sister Agnes when I waltzed in, and they tried to pretend that everything was just charming, but it didn't quite come off. Dinner, says the Lord of Markham House, will be at quarter to nine, so she'd best put it back in the oven. Then something kind of odd happened."

Wendy pulled at Todd's arm and stopped. The strap of her shoe had been broken by the fall she had taken earlier. "I'll just knot it and I think it'll be all right," she said. "Go on. What was the odd things?"

Todd had a puzzled expression. "I don't know what it meant, really, but it had a bad feeling to it. Agnes Markham was fuming; odd in the first place, just for having to delay dinner. And then she said something even odder: 'You and your little pranks! Waiting for your Miss Campbell to come and mystify your guests?' Then, before your uncle could answer, she went out into the kitchen."

"But Katy isn't—" Wendy began, and faltered.

"Isn't what?"

"Well—I don't think she likes my uncle, not at all. Where could my aunt get an idea like that?"

Todd shrugged. "I'm with you on that one, that is to say, nowhere. Anyway, Mr. Markham got around to saying hello to me, and told me

that Dr. Nine had phoned him to expect me." Todd paused, and his face took on a mischievious grin. "I'm afraid Dr. Nine did stretch a point a little bit. He was fairly sure that Mr. Markham would invite me in strictly on his own say-so—why, I don't know, but the Doctor said he had the feeling that there was something brewing that would make your uncle want all the company he could get."

"What, for heaven's sake?" asked Wendy.

"I don't know. In any case, apparently the good Doctor didn't think that was enough to insure my being around, so he mentioned our shipboard meeting, and I know Dr. Nine—by the time he was finished we probably sounded like the most star-crossed lovers since Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. So—" he shrugged.

"*'How do I love thee?'*" quoted Wendy. "*'Let me count the ways.'*"

Todd took it up. "*'I love thee to the breadth and depth and height my soul can reach, when feeling out of sight for the ends of Being and ideal Grace.'*"

They continued, quoting the lines of the sonnet in turn until Wendy spoke the final line: "*'I love thee with the breath, smiles, tears, of all my life! —and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death.'*" Then for several seconds they stood, and nothing was said or needed to be.

What happened then perhaps could have hap-

pened at a better time, a freer time, but what girl has ever picked the moment when a man sweeps her into his arms and tells her his whole heart's story with a kiss? For a long moment they were locked in an embrace, and Wendy wished that it might never end. But then Todd removed her arms from around his neck and stepped back a pace, shaking his head and chuckling.

"And what, pray, is so funny?" growled Wendy with an ominous expression on her face.

Todd straightened his expression. "Sorry," he said, "I was just thinking about Dr. Nine's little story to your uncle. It looks as though the Doctor is never wrong even when he tries to be." Again their lips met, gently and lovingly. "But about you—not laughing. Dead serious, Miss Markham. Love me?"

Wendy had never thought she would feel about a man the way she did now. But she did feel this strange, wonderful way, and she hoped the feeling would last forever. "Yes, my darling. I do love you, very much."

"And I love you." For a long moment Todd held her close against him, and then he looked down at her and nodded in the direction of Markham House. "we'd better be getting back. If we don't they might start thinking all sorts of evil thoughts about us."

They began to walk. "Hell," said Wendy, "Who knows? It may not be long before their

thoughts are correct—but then they won't be evil thoughts, will they?"

"Absolutely not, Mademoiselle. My intentions are, I regret to say, honorable."

"Oh, I'll bet I could give you some intentions that weren't exactly honorable," said Wendy wickedly.

"You could," Todd affirmed, "and very easily too. Don't fool around or I might prove you right very suddenly."

They continued in this light, bantering vein all the way back to Markham House, and Wendy was enjoying herself in the first relaxed conversation she'd had in what seemed like centuries—enjoying herself until they passed under a stand of trees and the bulk of the ancient structure was suddenly upon them.

Wendy turned to Todd. "Do we have to go in?"

He nodded in affirmation. "Afraid so. Me on orders from my boss, and you because—well, because you're a Markham, and you don't have much cherce, hmm?"

The last words were almost mocking and for a moment Wendy looked at Todd, startled, but he didn't seem to be aware of having said or done anything out of line.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, of course you're right, we have to go in. Just wishful thinking, I suppose. Shall we?"

This time the door was unlocked.

At first the inside seemed as deserted as it had on Wendy's first visit, but then there was a sudden bustle from the foyer-smoking room to the right of the stairs, and Edward Markham came out.

He was not a tall man, Wendy realized with a shock. For some reason she had always thought of him as spare and tall, but he seemed only a shade greater in height than she herself, and he was a good head shorter than Todd.

He smoked an incredibly bedraggled cigar, but his suit of grey tweed and silk dress shirt were faultless. He wore an Ascot—a flamboyant touch, especially with the ruby stickpin in it, and two massive rings on the third fingers of each hand. "Keeps the girls away," he had once weakly joked to Wendy.

His expression seemed as keen as ever, though, and he had the carriage and manner of a much younger man. He strode over to Todd and Wendy with long, determined steps.

"See y'finally got here, Wendy child," he said abruptly as he gave her a perfunctory kiss on the cheek. "We were beginning to wonder where you'd got off to. Well, no harm done, as they say. I just—" he glanced from Wendy to Todd and suddenly changed subjects. "Mr. Raymond! well, I guess I can call you Todd

under the circumstances, eh?" He made a fiendish wink in Wendy's direction.

"Uh," began Todd, but Edward Markham drowned him out. "Well! 's I was saying, Todd, we were getting a little worried about our wandering girl. You know, Wendy, you didn't tell anyone where you were off to."

Wendy nodded patiently. "That's true, Uncle Edward, but the simple fact is that there wasn't anyone around to tell."

Markham seemed annoyed by this answer, but more or less satisfied. "No matter, really. I was just a bit concerned about Wendy's safety. It's been—"

There was a sudden stacatto rap on the door. Gesturing to Wendy and Todd to excuse him, the elder Markham turned to answer it.

Two men stood on the threshold, one obviously a doctor, identified by the standard black bag, and the other just as obviously a performer or actor of some sort, though he had no prop to label him. Wendy knew Dr. Osbourne, of course; the erudite country doctor who still affected pince-nez and side-whiskers was almost a traditional figure around Blackwood. Every year since the beginning of time he had been saying that next year he would retire, but somehow that year never quite rolled around.

The other man looked familiar, too, but Wendy couldn't place him until her uncle spoke.

"Glad you could come around, Doctor. I had to fuss with Agnes about the meal, but I think it'll be worth your while—and you, Sydney! Can't tell you how glad I am that a real pro magus like Sydney Saint can drop up to spend an evening with an old duffer like me."

The magician laughed, and his voice was deep and resonant—the voice of a man who had spent thirty-five years on stage. "Glad I could come, Edward. You just happened to get me at the end of an engagement so I've got a few days free. What's this big project you have cooking?"

The others looked at Edward Markham curiously and he gestured. "Oh. nothing, really." He looked about him and seemed to come to a decision. "Actually, it's a person that I want you all to meet—" he paused, "those of you who don't already know her. Her name is Katy Campbell, and she's a witch."

For a moment Wendy thought that Saint was going to laugh out loud, but for some reason the magician caught himself, and looked at his host intently. "I can't say that's not interesting. What's she going to do? Ride around on a broom for us?"

Wendy restrained an impulse to say something.

"No—no, not really," answered Edward Markham. "Actually, I'll have to discuss it with her when she comes. Ah, yes, that reminds me:

would you come into the foyer with me?" Without looking at anyone else he turned and went briskly into the rather misnomered "foyer"—it was actually the size of a respectable sitting or living room. Rather puzzledly, the rest followed, Wendy and Todd taking up the rear. Todd seemed as baffled as Wendy, and she certainly hadn't expected this.

In the foyer, at one corner, was an old and somewhat dilapidated rocking chair. A young man was sitting in the chair, and apparently was taking an avid dislike to the entire world in general and this part of it in particular. Todd had looked at Wendy questioningly and now she answered. "That's my cousin, Gilbert, Agnes's son. He's very brilliant—a research chemist—but he has a lot of trouble holding jobs because of his temper. Or at least he used to, I haven't heard anything about him since I've been away."

Todd was surprised. "I didn't know Agnes was married."

Wendy pressed her lips together. "She isn't now, but she was for a few months a long time ago, long enough to start Gil going. It's another one of those things that we Don't Talk About."

Todd nodded understanding. Her uncle was speaking.

"—one thing I have to request of you. Uh—Miss Campbell will be arriving shortly, but I'd like to speak with her privately, in my study, be-

fore we all sit down to dinner. When she comes in I'd like you all to sort of not interfere or anything. Just let her go up the stairs herself—she's a nervous sort of woman and I don't want her to be frightened." He turned to Wendy. "Now that goes for you, too, my dear. You can wait in the hall, and talk to her—when we come out, but not until then."

Something ugly and dark was lurking beneath the surface, and Wendy's earlier happiness was completely gone now. "May I ask why?" she said, in a flat voice.

Her uncle looked at her and seemed almost about to say something—but then his manner changed. "Yes, my dear, you can ask why, but I'm afraid the answer will have to wait until later tonight."

Wendy started. Where had she heard that phrase before? And then she remembered: Katy had told her almost the same thing. What could the two of them be planning?

Dr. Osbourne's voice cut in, and to Wendy's surprise it seemed even colder than her own. "I'm sorry to have to disappoint you, Markham, but I'm afraid this isn't really the social call you expected. I only came over to give you a quick check and find out how the diabetes is going. Something came up earlier, and I have to go back down to the hospital and try to check it out. Damned curious."

Now it was Edward Markham's turn to be puzzled, and this was mixed with a pettish irritation. "The diabetes is the same as usual," he grumbled. "I take my shot and that's that, and I make the tests as you said I should, so forget about that. What's this thing that's so important?"

Dr. Osbourne sat down on the edge of a chair and, reaching into a humidor beside it, helped himself to one of his host's cigars. "Curious, as I say. You've been down to General Hospital, you remember the layout?—long, single-story T-shape at the back, behind the main part of the hospital?"

Markham nodded impatiently.

"Well," said Dr. Osbourne, "at one end of that T-bar in a room facing the back, we have one shelf that we set aside for poisons. One of the nurses went down to make the check this morning, as usual, and found out that one of the bottles had been taken."

He looked at the assembled faces, but no one said a word.

"Curious,—damned curious!, as I say," he continued. "I went down there, 'course, since I'm senior in charge, and checked things over. The nurse was right; one bottle had been taken, and there couldn't be any mistake. But there's more than that; she swore that when she'd opened the door it had been double-locked as it was sup-

posed to be. Even if it hadn't been, there's a night nurse on duty in sight of that door all the time. She didn't see anybody and says she would if there had been anybody to see. And the window on that room—well, it had a glass window that you could pivot open—but on the inside it has iron bars imbedded in cement, and they're as solid now as yesterday. We don't know quite what to make of it."

"What—sort of poison was it?" asked Wendy.

Dr. Osbourne gave her a grim look. "The missing bottle contains a twenty c.c. solution of hydrogen cyanide—enough to kill everyone in this room and then some." He shook his head. "And whoever has it seems to be able to go through locked doors or barred windows like a ghost."

"Or a witch?" said a voice from the hall.

CHAPTER SIX

HER FACE SET, a mask that none could read, Agnes Markham stood there. In one hand she held a serving spoon, still glistening with gravy, and it seemed to Wendy that this was an unsubtle hint about the dinner.

"A witch?" Agnes repeated. "Like Katy Campbell?"

Her brother strode out into the hall and looked at her with an expression of controlled desperation. "Agnes," he said through clenched teeth, "it'll be far better if for the time being you stay in the kitchen, were you know what you're doing, and leave the management of the house to me." With an apologetic nod of his head to the cluster of people at the foyer door, he went up the broad staircase to his study and, entering, closed the door behind him.

Wendy had closed her eyes at Agnes' words. The old woman still seemed to think of Katy as some sort of devil-worshipper, and she had re-

sented the companionship of her niece with the High Priestess. So much so, it had often occurred to Wendy, that it might well have been she who had started those rumors that had forced Wendy out of Blackwood.

Agnes Markham, thought Wendy, was the type to brood over hurts, real or imagined, and though her lack of courage was such that it was doubtful that she would ever seek a real revenge, one could easily believe her in the drugstore or the supermarket, with a word or two here and there —accompanied, of course, by a sympathetic shake of the head.

It was quite possible that all this time she had thought of Wendy as a competitor for the attention of her brother, and this, from Wendy's point of view, was sheerest nonsense. She and Edward Markham had never been anything more than legal relatives, living under the same roof; and each had tried to make clear the spare nature of the relationship in as many ways as possible.

Her aunt, who was now wearing an old cotton dress, topped with a cheap white full apron, looked over the guests once with a mental *hmmph!* and went back to her kitchen. Wendy could hear her inside, crashing pots and pans and banging doors open and closed.

"And what," said Todd's voice at her ear, "do you suppose that's all about?"

"I don't know," said Wendy tiredly and

truthfully. "I only know one thing for sure; that I wish Uncle Edward would tell me what it is he brought me here for, so I could make a decision as to whether I wanted to stay or leave. This whole thing is so frustrating."

"Frustrating for us," agreed Todd, "but we're not quite without help. I forgot to mention that there was a phone call from Dr. Nine earlier —seems that lecture he had to do on the Murray witchcult books didn't quite come off, so he found that he was free this evening. He's on his way here, and he should arrive within the next hour or so."

"Dr. Nine?" Wendy was still irritated. "He's as bad as the rest of them, except that he seems to *like* talking in riddles."

"Hey, easy now. The whole world isn't out to get you. Look at it this way: whatever happens, everything should be straightened out in the next few hours, and then you can do what you want."

Wendy's expression softened and she smiled at Todd. "I'd rather do what *you* want."

Todd laughed. "Shouldn't say things like that," he warned, "I just might take you up on that."

"I hate to interrupt the small talk," said a new voice, "but is it at all possible that you might say a word to me? Such as hello?"

Gilbert Markham stood against the railing, leaning most of his weight on the banister in such

a way that it made him appear deformed. He wore a rumpled and ill-fitting black flannel suit, and his shirt could have benefited from a trip to the laundry. Wendy suddenly realized that he had been standing there for some time, and when now she turned her attention full on, and saw the faint half-mocking smile on her cousin's flushed face, she wanted very much to be back in her classroom in London, with all of this never to happen.

No. Not quite all. There was Todd.

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything before, Gil," she answered, "but you didn't seem to be in the mood to talk to me, or anyone else, for that matter."

The mocking smile broadened. "My goodness gracious me!" said Gilbert, and now Wendy noticed the thickness in his voice, "but my little cousin has certainly grown sensitive to the needs and feelings of other people. My, my, how people do change!"

"Gil—" Wendy began.

"No, no, no. S'all right. I'm willing to believe't your heart was in 'r right place. Gotta say one thing though—I certainly am surprised that my little cousin would come when Uncle calls. Little cousin didn't exactly worship him, now, did she?"

Wendy had noticed Todd's face growing darker as her cousin talked, and now he suddenly

cut in. "I think, Mr. Markham, that you're not really able to realize what you're saying now. Maybe you'd better wait until—"

"And what the hell is it your business?" snarled Gilbert Markham, wheeling to face Todd. "You're my guest here, but that doesn't—"

"I am the guest of Edward Markham, your uncle," snapped Todd, "not yours."

Wendy pulled at Todd's arms. "Forget it, Todd," she said, "it doesn't matter."

Agnes Markham had entered from the kitchen a few seconds before, and seemed about to say something, but then someone rapped on the front door.

It was strange, thought Wendy, how so innocuous and neutral a sound could carry such an ominous weight. Everyone turned to watch as Wendy's aunt went to the door. For a long moment there was a tense silence, and then, finally, Wendy's aunt spoke.

"Come in, Miss Campbell," she said. "You're expected." Was there a sneer in the words, or was Wendy only imagining the stiff, stagy ring they had? She did not think she was reading things in, certainly not the way her aunt felt about Katy Campbell.

The blue-robed figure entered. Wendy could not see Katy's face, for the cowl was up and pulled well forward, and the long, closley-wrapped garment was completely obscuring. In a way, she

felt relief at this, because for some reason she felt guilty about standing silent during the accusations against the High Priestess. She was glad she didn't have to look Katy in the eye.

Agnes Markham stood back, between the little group at the foyer and the stairs, and watched as the visitor mutely climbed the stairs and, crossing the narrow landing, knocked on the door of Edward Markham's study. Almost instantly, as though Markham had been waiting at the other side, the door swung open. Then, curiously, there was a pause of a few seconds until he appeared in the doorway. Still there was silent, while the robe of the High Priestess swayed slowly forward and back, as though she were about to faint.

Markham looked down at the huddle at the bottom of the stairs, staring at Wendy intently for a moment with what seemed a regretful smile.

Suddenly Sydney Saint stepped forward. "I say, Edward!", he began and took a step forward. Agnes Markham turned to face him, and at the same time her brother looked down from the top of the stairs and gestured for patience. Then he turned to the blue-robed form beside him. "Come, my dear," he said, and putting his arm around the shoulders of the witchqueen's robe, he went back into the study.

The door closed, and they heard a rattle as the key was turned in the lock.

"Well!" said the magician, turning to Todd

and Wendy as Agnes Markham went back to the kitchen. "Now what in the devil's name is that all about?"

There was a humorless laugh beside them, and Gilbert Markham leaned in. "What 'in the *devil*' is a very apt phrase, Mr. Prestidigitator, sir. Wherever that bi- that woman is, there's bound to be trouble." He spoke with a controlled violence. His face seemed if anything more flushed, almost feverish, and to Wendy he looked like a time bomb that might go off any second. Without being conscious of it she edged closer to Todd.

Gilbert Markham noticed the movement. "Mm, is big strong guest-of-my-uncle going to protect you from me? Maybe he'd better worry more about someone—" he looked toward the study door,—"who can walk through a barred winddow and steal a bottle of hydrogen cyanide. Someone like a witch."

And now Wendy exploded. "Gil, if you have to act like a raving lunatic you can do it for people who'll be amused by it. I'm not, and I'm sure Todd isn't."

"Actually," said Todd," I *do* find it amusing. Slightly, anyway. But isn't your cousin a little old to believe in the supernatural? And even if he does think there are people who can walk through brick walls—there are, incidentally: Houdini did it back in the Twenties, but as Mr. Saint will tell you, he did it by a trick—granting this,

aren't people still innocent until proven gulity? Or is that one of the things that Gilbert *doesn't* believe in?"

"Tricks!" growled Gilbert, with a sidelong glance of contempt at the rather bemused Sydney Saint. "My uncle and his tricks, and jokes—he's been fooling with that junk for so long that all he can think of is deceiving people."

With a sigh of disgust he turned away, and sat down on the edge of the stairs. He swirled the ice in his drink, and then took down a good half-tumbler full in a few gulps.

Dr. Osbourne joined the trio, glancing sadly over at Gilbert Markham. "Problems, that boy," he said, "bound determined he's going to get all his medicine out of a ninety proof bottle. Funny how people see a knife, some of them, and just can't resist stabbing something with it. The ones we call criminals are the fellas that stab outward; but the others, the ones that keep putting that knife in themselves, we don't call 'em anything, much. Except suicides, finally."

The Doctor had spoken low and Gilbert Markham had heard nothing. He continued to stare into his now-empty glass, his face a sullen mask. "But why is he doing this?" whispered Wendy. "He never drank like this before. He had a bad temper, but—"

"The temper he still has," answered the Doctor, "but as far as 'before' goes, you have to re-

member that that was a few years ago. Matter of fact—" he peered through the gold pince-nez at Wendy, making her feel somewhat like a lab specimen, "—it was just around the time you left, or a few months later, that he really started drinking. It was pretty bad at first—he passed out on the streets a few times and they brought him to the hospital—but then he just sort of settled into routine with liquor." The Doctor frowned. "He's still settlin'. Deeper and deeper."

Todd spoke. "You have no idea what started it?"

Dr. Osbourne shook his head. "No, and I've asked him often enough. All I get, usually, is a rant and rave about how everybody hates him."

"You know, magicians—professionals, anyway," said Sydney Saint, "have a habit of hitting the bottle pretty hard, especially if they're artists. Just theorizing, I'd say the reason generally is that they feel that their art isn't being given its due; and that they, therefore, aren't either. They get frustrated, and—" he left the sentence unfinished.

"I don't think that's my cousin's problem," said Wendy. "If he has any artistic sensitivity he's been careful to hide it. He likes chemistry because it's an exact science, and anything inexact bothers him."

"Interesting," said Dr. Osbourne. "I'm sur-

prised he said 'hydrogen cyanide' then. I said it was a *solution* of hydrogen cyanide, which the veriest tyro chemist knows is called prussic acid. Only when it's heated and becomes gaseous is it plain old 'hydrogen cyanide'. Which reminds me, I have to get down there—the hospital—and start trying to track it down."

"You *will* come back, won't you?" asked Wendy "As soon as it's cleared up?"

Dr. Osbourne bowed dramatically. "Couldn't refuse, with such a little doll-child asking me," he said, glancing at Todd, "though you seem to be pretty well spoken for."

Wendy snuggled against Todd. "I'm afraid so," she laughed, "but I hope that won't keep you from dinner here if you can make it back."

"Doesn't look like it, I'm afraid," said the Doctor as he opened the front door, "but I'll try. Tell your uncle that I'm sorry I couldn't wait for his little conference with Miss Campbell to be finished," his face suddenly held a shadow of worry, "and tell him I want to see him tomorrow, down at my office. Anytime during the day, alright?" The Doctor paused and took a long breath, and then concluded, "Nice meeting you, Mr. Raymond. Take good care of this little girl, she needs being looked after."

Then the door had closed and he was gone.

Todd looked at Wendy with a mock-serious ex-

pression. "Looked after? I wonder just what he means by that—are there clouded events in your past you haven't told me about?"

Wendy laughed, but she was thinking, *yes, Todd, there are things about me you don't know. When we are away from this horrid place I will tell you all of me there is to know.* Perhaps it would be better to change the subject.

"Uh, Todd," she groped for a moment, and then inspiration truck. "What was that you were saying before? About Houdini? Did he really walk through a brick wall?"

Todd nodded. "It was built right on the stage by masons, on a framework resting on a plastic sheet, with a rug underneath it. An audience committee checked for trapdoors in the rug or sheet, and then after the wall was built two screens were put against it, in the center of each side. Right so far?" he asked Sydney Saint.

The illusionist agreed. "Every detail."

"The committee made a circle around the wall and screens, so Houdini couldn't just sneak around one end or over the top," Todd continued. "They were all in full view anyway. Then," he paused for dramatic effect, "Houdini went behind one screen, and pulled it against the wall. About five seconds later, he shoved away the screen on the other side of the wall and stepped forward. The committee checked the wall and the rug and sheeting. Still all solid."

"And," said Sydney Saint, "they turned the wall all around on its casters to show that nothing had been done to the wall, and that Houdini didn't have an identical twin or some such thing."

"But, but," Wendy stammered, "that's impossible!"

Saint looked down at her and cocked an eyebrow. "And what, little one, would be the point in a magician doing it if it wasn't?"

Wendy turned to Todd. "All right, sir," she said with a fixed state, "now that you've given me the puzzle you can give me the solution."

"No," said Todd.

"And—why—not?"

"Because," said Todd, "I gave my word to the person who told me that I wouldn't tell the secret. That's the first reason. The second one is that I don't think I remember the darn thing, anyway."

"Arrgh!" said Wendy, smiling sweetly. He was not going to get away with this.

Sydney Saint intervened. "I don't think the young lady should be kept in suspense," he said. "After all, the trick hasn't been performed in twenty years and probably never will be again, union rates for masons being what they are." He scowled briefly. "Actually, it all depended on something the audience had thought was elimi-

nated at the start. The wall was real, and solid; no trick about that; but—"

The sound that came then was muffled, but harsh. It kept the magician from completing his sentence, and even brought Gilbert Markham out of his sullen reverie. It was the sound of glass breaking, and it came from Edward Markham's study.

As Gilbert struggled to his feet Todd swept past him and took the stairs two at a time. To Wendy time seemed to have slowed down, she felt she was looking at all that was happening through a tunnel. She tried to speak but couldn't.

But she knew, instinctively, that something horrible had happened, as she had known in her heart when first she had read the letter from her aunt.

Todd had pounded on the door and tried the knob; there was no response and the door was still locked. "Mr. Markham! Miss Campbell!" he shouted. "Are you all right? Unlcok the door!"

No sound now came from within.

Gilbert had reached the landing. "Shouting isn't going to do any good," he snarled at Todd. "That damn witch-woman's probably brained him with the brandy bottle. She's not going to open the door."

"Is there another key?" asked Todd.

Gilbert frowned, trying to think clearly. "Yeah," he said after several seconds, "there used to be a spare in the pantry. But—dammit, I don't know if it's there! We'll just knock the door in."

Todd looked at it, and back at Gilbert. "It's solid oak. The key will be a lot easier, and this is not time to debate about it." He raced down the stairs and almost collided with Agnes Markham as she came in from the kitchen.

"What's happened?" she asked. "I—I heard a crash, upstairs, and—" Todd disappeared into the kitchen behind her without stopping to answer.

Her son leaned over the railing at the top of the stairs. "we heard it, too," he said. "I think that Campbell witch did something to him, and —" he glared at Wendy, frightening her, "I'm not going to wait for lover boy to find out!" He went back to the study door and began kicking and pounding on it, almost like a man possessed. It might have withstood the onslaught of a calmer person, but now it began to give way, and then suddenly burst open, a jagged semicircular section torn from it where the heavy brass lock had been. Gilbert Markham disappeared into the room. Almost at the same instant Todd reappeared from the kitchen holding a key. He stopped when he saw the open door. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Wendy said from inside her little tunnel. "He just smashed it in."

Todd looked at her concernedly for a moment and then dashed up the stairs and into the study. Wendy suddenly came back to reality and followed, more slowly, with the magician just behind her. At the foot of the stairs Agnes Markham stood, tense and expectant, but made no move to go up with them.

As Wendy walked into the study Todd wheeled to face her. "You shouldn't have come up," he said. "I'm afraid that . . ."

But there was no need of words for the moment; it was all there to see.

In the fireplace logs were roaring and crackling, and the odor in the stifling room mixed with a more pungent smell of something like incense. Across the room from the fireplace, sitting in the desk chair that now was askew from its position behind the desk, was her uncle, Edward Markham.

A brass-hilted obsidian dagger was plunged into his chest, and the metal, against the spotless shirt, glinted dully in the light from the desk lamp.

Beside him, and next to the stand on which it usually rested, was the brandy decanter, smashed into countless pieces on the rug. The liquid had

begun to soak in but the stain was still spreading.

And Katy Campbell was not there. Indeed, so empty was the room of her presence that it seemed to Wendy that she had never been there at all.

The High Preistess had vanished.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A BIBLE lay open on the table. Wendy read, absently, the passage that had been encircled in red ink:

Thou Shalt Not Suffer A Witch To Live.

Gilbert Markham had been leaning out the rear window, and now he spun to face her, his eyes gleaming with ferocity. Swiftly he crossed to the desk and snatched up a heavy brass paperweight that had been made in the shape of a scarab. "She didn't go out the window," he said in a low, ugly voice, "and she didn't come out the front door. She's still in here, somewhere. the little killer." Suddenly he looked past Wendy, and and she jumped out of the way as he stormed over to the corner of the room where the big wardrobe stood. Todd had been checking the windows, but now he ran toward Gilbert, who was holding the paperweight ready to strike.

But before Todd could reach him, Wendy's cousin had flung the doors wide.

The wardrobe was empty.

Wendy realized that she, too, had thought Katy was hiding there, and even more surprised to realize that her gasp was a breath of relief. She pushed her dumbfounded cousin gently to one side and looked in.

On the floor lay a twisted jumble of wire coat hangers, with a few articles of clothing dropped carelessly on top. The shoes that Wendy had noticed earlier—the shoes that had belonged to her father—were still there, but there was nowhere a mouse could have hidden.

Gilbert began to stammer and yell, and Todd grabbed him and slapped him sharply. "Get hold of yourself! One killing is enough!" Todd turned to Wendy. "You'd better call the police, and tell your aunt, Wendy." She knew that he was making an effort to keep her calm, but it didn't seem necessary. She seemed calmer now, she thought, than she had ever been. Wendy nodded slowly, but didn't move. Somehow she had forgotten how to walk, to move, to speak.

Todd was still looking at her, and now shouted past her, to the horrified Sydney Saint, "Sir, you'd better make that phone call to the police. Don't say anything to Mr. Markham's sister yet—I'll speak to her." Still without speaking, Saint turned and left the room. Todd turned back to Gilbert Markham. "Now what are you talking about? Why couldn't she have gone out the window?"

Markham was gradually recovering himself. "Because," he gasped, "there aren't any marks. There's a flower bed just below, and even in the moonlight you can see it isn't touched. And she couldn't have jumped past it without landing on the cement and breaking her cursed neck."

"But she didn't come out the door!" cried Todd. "We were all standing in full view of it every second after she went in. If she didn't leave by the door *or* the window, and she's not here, what did she do, just evaporate or dissolve like smoke?"

"YES!" Gilbert Markham screamed. "Don't *you* believe what you see? She's gone, she's walked through the wall just like she must have to steal that poison! She must have done it, because no one else could have!"

Todd was still searching the room, checking over every inch as he talked. Now he gave up and came over to Wendy, shaking his head at her cousin. "I shouldn't have left you here, dear," he said, "so let's go back downstairs and wait for the police."

They went back out to the landing, Gilbert a few paces behind. Wendy's aunt still stood where she had been when they left her, and though her face was still expressionless there was a strange wounded look to the eyes. "I heard a little of what Mr. Saint said on the phone," she said. "It's true—my brother is dead?"

"I'm afraid so, Miss Markham," said Todd.

"He's been stabbed in the heart with a dagger, apparntly—"

"But that's impossible!" Agnes Markham cried. "I mean, it just couldn't have happened." She looked from Todd to Wendy and back. "He —he, Edward could have fought her off. I don't understand!" To Wendy, who was just beginning to come out of the strange trance-like state she had been in, her aunt seemed more frightened than grief-stricken.

"Maybe he did," said Todd. "That crash was a bottle. He might have tried to grab it to defend himself."

In the distance and growing louder was the sound of a siren. Wendy turned to Todd. "Did you—", it seemed very difficult to speak, as though it were something requiring a great deal of effort and concentration, "Did you check him, Todd? I mean, there's no chance that—"

"No chance," said Todd. "No pulse, no eye reaction. I don't think anyone could survive a stabbing like that. There isn't any doubt, Wendy. Your uncle is dead, and much as I hate to say it, it looks like Katy Campbell did it: murdered him, and then somehow escaped."

Agnes Markham sank down into a chair by the foyer door, staring at nothing, and when the businesslike rapping sounded at the door it was Sydney Saint who came in from the foyer to answer it.

Three men came in. Two carried heavy black boxes with lettering on the side. The third, a balding man in his early fifties, looked up at Wendy and Todd with a questioning glance. "In there," said Todd, jerking his head toward the door behind him. The balding man nodded to the other two, who went up the stairs and into the study.

Todd took Wendy by the hand and led her down the stairs. She realized that he still wasn't sure whether she was able to take care of herself, and gave him a little halfsmile of reassurance, but already her mind was begining to spin with the implications of what had happened.

"I'm Inspector Reed," the balding man said abruptly, as they reached the foot of the stairs. He looked at her. "You're Miss Markham, Wendy Markham?"

"Yes," she answered dully.

Inspector Reed gave her an appraising look. "Would you like to tell me what happened?"

This was just too much to face, too much to think about. "Couldn't Todd—Mr. Raymond? He saw it all too, and I just don't feel able to think too clearly." She sat down on the bottom step of the staircase.

Reed shrugged, and turned to Todd. "We already have people looking for Miss Campbell," he said, "Mr. Saint here told us about her."

Todd's eyes seemed to hold a sickness. "It

seems," he said, "that Katy Campbell killed Mr. Markham."

As the two men talked above her, Wendy drifted off into a void where their voices were but a distant, echoing chatter. It seemed as though she had been cut loose from everything, every morning in reality. She had been caught in the web of this fiendish event, and what made it worse was that the very one who brought her to this net of death had been trapped in it himself.

Katy Campbell.

From the moment she had opened the letter it had all been ordained. If she had not come, would her uncle have died? She knew not, and it almost seemed that she had been what the Fates had awaited.

For here, only hours after she had arrived, someone had died.

Katy Campbell.

She had run from Blackwood, years before, because of the strange feeling in the pit of her stomach that some horrible event was waiting. She had had no desire to stand and face it.

Katy Campbell.

But the years in a distand land had changed nothing, really—only delayed it. And finally, because of a wheedling note, she had returned, knowing that there would, at least, be *one* person that she could rely on, that she could trust.

Katy Campbell: the name had been echoing sul-

lenly, like a great deep bell, as she ran through the corridors of her mind, trying to lose herself and hide. But she could not hide, and every memory was a mirror to show her not only herself but what surrounded her, with a clarity that glowed like fire.

This magician, what was he? Her uncle had invited him up, but why? Because he knew the secret of walking through a stone wall?

And even Todd, what did she know of him? He had almost forced an introduction on the boat, and then that strange interview with Dr. Nine, who had told her so many strange things. Todd knew the secret of the brick wall too, though he said he'd forgotten. And why would he come up here, besides being with her? What did he want, he and Dr. Nine?

Her own relatives were almost the strangest of the lot. Her cousin Gilbert seemed to have changed completely, and her aunt had been acting, with only a few exceptions, as though everything were some sort of play or ritual.

Ritual. Like a rope it brought her back to she whom Dr. Nine called *the* woman; Katy Campbell.

Trying to think about Katy was like trying to grasp a fog. In the back of her mind during all the time she had been away, the witch-woman had moved, a gentle smile on her face. Then, at Dr. Nine's apartment, the first strange words; and

later, and more puzzlingly, from Katy Campbell herself had come the riddles, the unanswered questions.

And now?

And now the conclusion seemed inescapable; for some reason, some hidden memory or motive, Katy Campbell had murdered her uncle in cold blood, and—in some way—escaped. Her uncle had died at the hand of the witchqueen, a knife in his heart as though he had been a sacrifice.

As though he had been a sacrifice.

Outside, the moon was still high in the heavens, and its rays seemed to turn Markham House to ice. A pulsing blood-red flicker flashed reflected in the windows from the rotating light of the police car. Two policemen moved about the grounds, their flashlights stabbing and probing.

Within, while the Inspector stood near her and listened to Todd and Sydney Saint, Wendy dwelt on the word *sacrifice*. Was it possible that Katy no longer studied the obscure services of the 'Hidden Church', as she had once called it, but had descended to the black magic that the townspeople thought she performed? Katy had always talked about her rituals as part of a religion—a minority religion, she had said, but just as true a one as any, and older than most. Spells and hexes were perversions of the true religion, according to Katy.

Soon, Wendy thought, soon it would be Hal-

loween—All Hallows Eve. It was, she knew, one of the four most important days of the year to the High Priestess; the others were May Eve and the summer and winter solstices. On these days the votary was to make some offering—some sort of gift, or—

Or sacrifice.

The thought was too horrible to really even consider, but at the same time it refused to be denied. Katy had had no real reason to kill her uncle—not money, vengeance—what could it have been? What else?

There were the shoes, she suddenly remembered. Her father's shoes. Why were they there? What possible use could anyone have for them, except as mementoes, and that unlikely? Had Katy been after the shoes, had she wanted them for some reason?"

. . *your father's death wasn't accidental, and Katy Campbell knew something about it* . . .

But this made no sense either, simply because the shoes were still there. If Katy could make herself invisible, surely a pair of shoes wouldn't have been a problem. And now the puzzles seemed to snowball and rise up as though they would engulf Wendy, drown her, suffocate her . . .

She was suddenly aware that everyone had stopped talking and brought her attention back to the present. Inspector Reed, along with Todd and

Sydney Saint, had broken off what he was saying to look at the front door. From the other side of the door various sounds were drifting, and finally there was a perfunctory knock followed by an abrupt swinging-open of the door.

On the porch stood four men. Two were the policemen who had been checking the grounds, and the third was someone who apparently had fallen on hard times, from the looks of him.

The fourth, who now stepped through the doorway and shook hands with Inspector Reed as though he knew him, was Dr. Claudius Nine.

Wendy got somewhat unsteadily to her feet, and Todd came over to help her. Dr. Nine turned to them and said, "I'm sorry that my fears were so well-founded." Looking back at the Inspector he said, "What happened?"

"You first, old friend. You mean to say you expected this?"

Dr. Nine shook his head. "Not this drastic," he said, "and not to Edward Markham."

Inspector Reed didn't seem very happy with the answer but accepted it and filled Dr. Nine in on the occurrences of the evening. While he talked, Dr. Nine stood as motionless as a wax statue, seeming not even to breathe. The policeman had followed the Doctor in, along with their charge, and this last seemed almost contemptuous of his surroundings, inspite of his threadbare outfit.

"Who," said Inspector Reed finally, "is this?"

One of the policemen cleared his throat. "Found him in back, Sir. He was sitting behind the hedge near the stone tower. Says his name is Perry Dunlop."

"*Pericles* Dunlop, if you please," said the bum with a withering glance at the policeman. "And how," he continued, "may I serve the minions of the law, other than by moving on?"

Inspector Reed attempted to be cagey. "Did I say I wanted you for anything else?"

Dunlop made an impatient gesture. "The policeman could have told me to do that—besides, you are, if I am not misreading the lettering on the car out front, an Inspector. Loitering, trespassing, and panhandling are not quite up in your league, Sir." Reed's attempt, Wendy saw, had gained him nothing.

The Inspector tried not to be a sore loser. "They are when someone's been murdered."

Dunlop looked at him steadily. "I see. I am at your command."

"What were you doing back there?" asked the Inspector.

"Resting. I came in the back way, through the orchard behind that decrepit stone tower. I confess that I ate a few of the apples—a few too many, I'm afraid, and I sat down to let my stomach settle."

"Could you see the lighted window at the back

of the house on the second floor, the one just opposite the tower?'

"Quite clearly, indeed I could," answered Dunlop, with a patient expression. "I really wasn't watching it," he admitted. "I'm not that sort of person. I only looked up when I heard the woman's voice."

No one said a word, and Wendy felt pain when she breathed.

"What did this woman say?" asked the Inspector.

"She said, 'Now no more play-acting; now it really happens,' in this sort of rasping whispery voice."

"Go on, man," said the Inspector. "Tell us everything that happened."

"Everything I saw," Dunlop corrected in slight rebuke. "Gentleman appears at the window, oldish chap, seems surprised. Then, just as quick, he seems to be pulled back into the room. Sound of glass breaking right after, and then pounding and wood breaking á little later. *He,*" Dunlop nodded at Gilbert Markham," shows at the window and looks around, and then ditto that one." He indicated Todd. "Then nothing until your—your officers brought me around here."

Inspector Reed looked at Dunlop and shook his head. "We probably are going to need you as a witness," he said, "So you'd be wise not to plan to leave Blackwood for a while."

Dunlop seemed concerned for a moment. "Couldn't you arrest me for loitering, Inspector? If I don't have a roof over my head and something to eat I don't know if my funds will permit a stay in Blackwood, and I should like to be of assistance if at all possible."

Reed seemed amused. "I think we can manage that. Officer Wiggins!"

"Sir?"

"Take this man down and book him on loitering—but see he gets a private cell."

"Thank you, Inspector." Dunlop beamed as he was led out by a somewhat puzzled patrolman.

"And just where," the Inspector finally said, "does that leave us? Right where we were before." He was about to continue when the door open again and Dunlop reappeared with the policeman in tow. "I just remembered one other thing, Inspector."

"Well?"

"I don't know if it's important, but just after this first man, the older one, appeared at the window, I heard a sort of hissing sound, soft like a cat. Then something seemed to jerk him back from the window." Dunlop lifted his shoulders and let them drop. "I don't know. I just thought it might help you."

"It very well might." It was Dr. Nine who

spoke. "A good evening to you, Mr. Pericles Dunlop."

When the door had closed again he turned to the Inspector. "Now I think we're getting somewhere," he said and gave Wendy a reassuring glance.

"Really?" said Inspector Reed. "Just how?"

"That unseen witness," said Dr. Nine. "Y'see, nobody wants to make a murder look impossible. If anything, they want it to look very easy if not accidental. But our killer didn't know about that little chap behind the hedge."

"You aren't making sense!" cried the Inspector. "He's the one that proves it *was* a sealed room."

"You miss my point," said Dr. Nine, "but it isn't important. May I take a look at the study?"

"My men are still working," answered the Inspector, "but you can look around as long as you go by the usual rules—no touch, no take."

Dr. Nine stopped halfway up the stairs and turned to Todd and Wendy. "I'll talk to you in a few minutes," he said, "but right now I have to clear up a few things."

Gilbert Markham had got up again, and now he lashed out at the Inspector. "How long are you going to stand around here playing at Sherlock Holmes while that woman is out somewhere?

Shouldn't you be getting her behind bars right now? I mean, it isn't like we don't know she did it—we do, we just don't know how she got out of the room!"

Inspector Reed regarded Markham with ill-concealed diskike. "We have a bulletin out on Miss Campbell and I'm sure she'll be in custody soon. In the meantime I'm trying to insure that we have a wee bit of justice done, by gathering evidence, whatever or whoever it points to."

Agnes Markham stood as well. "I think, Inspector," she said as she glanced at her son, "that you might take good advice freely given. When you have this murderess behind bars then you'll have time for theories and clues."

Wendy's head was throbbing. "Shut up!" she found herself screaming. "Everyone, just shut up!" And then she had collapsed in Todd's arms and the tears were rolling down her cheeks.

The phone cut off whatever Agnes or Gilbert Markham would have said to answer this outburst. While Wendy trembled in Todd's arms the Inspector went into the foyer and answered the ring.

"Right . . . this is he . . . where? . . . right, I'll be down shortly." There was a long pause, then, "all right, we'll do it that way if Miss Markham is agreeable. Check." He hung up and went to the foot of the stairs. "Dr. Nine!"

Dr. Nine came out of the study, holding a book

with a brightly-colored jacket, and Wendy could read the title: IN THE NAME OF CONSCIENCE by Nikolai Khokhlov. It meant nothing to her, but the forcing of her attention had stopped the tears flowing. She wiped her eyes on the handkerchief Todd profferred.

"New development?" asked Dr. Nine.

"I told you not to handle anything. Yes. A patrol car spotted Katy Campbell wandering through a field about midway between here and her home. They have her in a cell down at our little four-cell jailhouse, and she seems to be in a pretty odd state. She—" Reed glanced hesitantly at Wendy, —"she told them that she'll only talk if you and Wendy ar there."

"Talk?" echoed Gilbert Markham. "You mean she's already admitted to the murder?"

"If you understood English," said Inspector Reed, losing his patience, "you'd realize I didn't say that at all. Nor did Miss Campbell."

"Well, then, what does she mean, talk?"

Inspector Reed looked at Gilbert Markham pityingly. "She said," he replied with the tone one reserves for children, "that she saw the murder done, and that she knows who the killer is."

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT WAS as though Inspector Reed had just read out a death sentence. For a moment there was silence. Then Gilbert Markham recovered and said, "Are you trying to tell us that there was someone *else* up there with Uncle, who not only vanished but did her one better by appearing as well?"

"*I* am not trying to tell you anything," the Inspector replied. Dr. Nine had replaced the book in the study and descended to the main floor. "Is there a flashlight handy?" he enquired.

Wendy went over to a small side table at the "dead" corner of the front hall. There had been —yes, the flash was still here. She handed it to Dr. Nine. "I would like—thank you, my dear—I would like to take a look at that tower for a few moments before we go downtown," said Dr. Nine. "I'd like to have you two come along with the Inspector and I," he indicated Todd and Wendy, "and then we'll go right down to the jail."

"We aren't wanted?" said Gilbert Markham.

"You're quite welcome to come out, if you wish," Dr. Nine replied. "I just thought that since you've already conducted your own little trial and found Miss Campbell guilty that you would not be greatly interested in pursuing evidence."

For a few seconds Gilbert's jaw worked but he said nothing. Finally he turned and went back into the foyer, and a few seconds later there was a sound of ice being dropped into a glass.

Todd took Wendy's hand, and she followed him in turn as he followed the Inspector and Dr. Nine out through the kitchen and boxlike hall to the back door and out.

The roses looked black in the waning moonlight. Somehow it seemed appropriate to Wendy. A few feet away, Dr. Nine had stooped to look at two semicircular depressions at the very edge of the soft earth.

"A ladder," said Dr. Nine, "and recently, too."

"We keep the ladders and such in the tower, Doctor," Wendy volunteered. She was trying to say things and make suggestions that would help Katy, for she was still unconvinced that the High Priestess was a murderess. It was difficult with someone like Dr. Nine, however, for you never knew what he was thinking or how he would interpret things.

Turning on the flash, Dr. Nine pushed the rot-

ting door of the tower aside and stepped in, followed by Wendy and the other two. She hoped that Sydney Saint was keeping an eye on Gilbert—if he got too drunk, sitting in that foyer, he would be unbearable by the time she got back from the jail.

The interior of the tower was about twelve feet in diameter, but the spiral wooden staircase that clung to the sides only reached two-thirds of the way up the inside of the three-story structure.

Apparently the place was only used now for storage. Boxes were piled high on one side and thick with dust, stacks of pruning and harvesting tools for the orchard lay against the wall a little further around the circle. Beside the staircase stood a one-section ladder, its bottom posts dark with clinging bits of soil.

"Odd," said Dr. Nine. "The ladder was apparently used today sometime, and the marks we saw outside would indicate that it was leaned to bring it near the study window—but for the critical time, we know it wasn't." He poked at the orchard tools, picking up the pole-and-rope-loop, then the sickle, which he swished experimentally through the air in a rather swashbuckling fashion. Then he seemed to find what he was looking for, a hook, and Wendy watched as he went up the rickety staircase to the window that

faced the room where her uncle had been murdered.

Dr. Nine poked at the bars that crisscrossed the tower window, but, old as the building was, they held firm. There was no way someone could have "pole-vaulted" using the ladder, for they simply wouldn't have been able to get in the window once next to it.

He made his way cautiously back down to the floor. "No," he said with finality, "the murderer couldn't have used that window. It's as tight as a drum, in terms of accessibility. Which gets us precisely nowhere."

"Well, then," said Wendy, "shouldn't we be on our way down to see Ka—Miss Campbell," she glanced at Inspector Reed, who seemed not to have heard.

"A good idea," said Dr. Nine quickly. "Shall we?"

The police car had gone, so the four climbed into Dr. Nine's Bentley, the Doctor graciously allowing Todd the honor of driving it. As it began to hum along the almost terrifying quiet streets Wendy had the sudden wish that it could go on forever, just a smooth gliding feeling as they moved through darkness, she was Todd next to her, if only . . .

If only there weren't riddles that had to be solved.

"Next right here," said Dr. Nine abruptly.

Todd made the turn, but protested, "the jail is straight on that way. Where are we off to now?"

"Just the hospital," explained Dr. Nine. "I want to pick up Dr. Osbourne befor we see Katy Campbell."

It was several minutes before they reached the hospital, but curiously no one seemed to want to talk. Wendy was content, for now all she could think of was that soon she would see Katy and then at least some of the riddles might begin to disappear.

Only a few lights were on now, and a street-lamp glowed dimly at the center of the drive. As Todd glided smoothly to a stop Dr. Nine stepped out. "I shall be but a few moments," he said. "As soon as I can locate Dr. Osbourne we'll be on our way."

It was more than a few moments. At one point Wendy explained to Todd that the jail was really only a few minutes walk from Markham House, taking shortcuts available only to a pedestrian. "We'd be there by now," she complained. Wendy knew that she was being a sort of nag but she couldn't help it; she had begun to get a gnawing feeling in the pit of her stomach about Katy, and the sooner she could see that the High Priestess was safe and well—

What was she worrying about? Katy Camp-

bell was not only inside a jail but inside a cell, with a guard outside, probably. She was safer there than she could be anywhere else, certainly better off than out at shadowy Shoscombe Manor. If Katy were innocent, she had less to fear in jail than anywhere else in Blackwood.

If she were innocent.

If she were guilty . . .

It was a possibility Wendy refused to accept, really. She could consider it, abstractedly, but that Katy, whatever had happened in her uncle's study, had plunged that knife into her uncle's heart was something she simply could not accept.

But if she weren't innocent, then what in Heaven's name—or Hell's—had happened? And even if there were a logical explanation that showed her innocent, what would the town of Blackwood do and think?

Blackwood hated the witch-queen. They hated her, Wendy knew, because Katy Campbell had never wanted to become one of them. If they held her life in her power, as a jury of twelve 'good souls and true', what would they do? Would it matter if Katy were innocent, once she was at their mercy, and they could punish her and even feel justified and good while doing it?

Wendy shuddered, and tried to wrench her mind away from the prospect.

Some time passed before Dr. Nine came out

again, with Dr. Osbourne just behind him. "Sorry I took so long," Dr. Nine apologised, "but Dr. Osbourne was in the middle of a 'treatment'—daughter number seven for Mrs.—what did you say her name was?"

"Renfrew. Cicely Rendrew."

"Now that," said Dr. Nine, "is a good, solid Victorian name, although it goes back—" he suddenly stopped, his eyes widening. "Renfrew-shire," he breathed dazedly.

'Dr. Nine, whatever is wrong?" asked Wendy, frightened by the horrible tone in his voice.

Dr. Nine pressed his fists against his eyes for a moment. "I'm not sure if anything's wrong, really, but—Todd! Get this thing to the jail as fast as you can."

Todd obeyed instantly, and Dr. Nine refused to say another word during the fast and bumpy ride. In a few minutes the Bentley swung into an obscure side street and halted before a stucco archway.

A purple globe cast unearthly shadows on them as they left the car, and Wendy's footsteps echoed strangely in the long hall and flight of steps that opened into the jail's receiving room. The others had raced on ahead, and now, as she entered, a white-faced attendant was speaking to Dr. Nine.

"—here a little while," he was saying in a voice leaden with shock, "and just now I looked in and she was—gone."

"Gone?" cried Wendy.

The jailer made a fretful grimace. "Not gone away, not like that. She—she's dead."

Tiny pinpoints of darkness began to close in on Wendy's vision and there was a buzzing in her ears. Fiercely she fought off the fainting spell and followed half-blindly as Dr. Nine and Dr. Osbourne went along the ground-floor corridor to Katy Campbell's cell.

It was plain enough, three concrete walls and a front of cast-iron bars with the door set in the center. In the rear wall was set a low, barred window, and beyond it Wendy could make out a dim pattern of hedges and trees.

But these details she only noticed after a few seconds. At first her attention was riveted to the crumpled figure on the floor.

Katy Campbell lay with her body curiously twisted, her head toward the door and her feet pointing toward the rear wall. Around her neck a four foot length of rope had been looped, and now it hung down loosely and showed the deep lines where it had cut into the High Priestess' neck. It was a nondescript piece of clothesline; one end of its soiled length stood out whitely against Katy's black dress, while the other tip had a curious brownish discoloration and seemed frayed.

Wendy grasped the iron bars of the door for

support, for reality seemed to be sliding out from beneath her.

Here, within hours of an impossible disappearance another miracle had occurred. Inside a locked and guarded cell, the witch-queen had been murdered by a killer who vanished like smoke.

And then everything was smoke and drifting mist, and Wendy was gliding down through nowhere. Ahead of her, a great oaken door loomed. As she reached it the door burst open and a myriad of leering, whispering faces looked down on her and shrieked unspeakable things.

The sounds merged into one long rushing roar, and then there was silence and darkness.

After what seemed a century, she felt something soft dabbing at her face, something soft and moist. She opened her eyes.

She was sitting in the desk chair in the jail's receiving room. Todd Raymond, a worried expression on his face, was wiping her face with a washcloth. On the other side of the room a makeshift table had been erected, and bare bulbs from unshaded lamps at either end illuminated the body of Katy Campbell. Dr. Osbourne was working at his small black case; a hypodermic needle glinted briefly in his hands. Beside him stood Dr. Nine, whose eyes stared unseeingly as he apparently wrestled with the insoluble problem.

Violently Wendy pushed the damp cloth away.

"I'm all right," she snapped. "Just leave me alone!"

Todd pulled back. "Sorry," he said mildly, "Just wanted to—oh, never mind. I have to tell you—"

"You don't have to tell me anything," Wendy said, now drained of all emotion. "There's nothing I want to hear, from anyone, now or ever."

She realized, with a sick feeling, the meaning of the way she was talking to Todd now. Their relationship had been fragile, a thing born in beauty of the ugliness of both circumstance and atmosphere. Now—

She didn't know. Todd had not changed at all, but the sight of Katy lying strangled on the floor of the cell had done something—the slender cord might have snapped under the strain. There had simply been too much to take: what had begun as an irritation and troubling of dead memories had proceeded to unpleasantness, malice, and now murder. Some unseen thing had struck, twice in this single horrible night, and in the space of a few hours had destroyed all that was Wendy's lfe here in Blackwood, both the head of the family that had been no family to her, and the hated and feared High Priestess who had been all the family and friend that she had ever known here.

It had been too much; and now she dared lean her weight on nothing, for it might crack beneath the strain and hurtle her into a void of screaming insanity from which, she knew, she

could never return. She could depend on no one, and that had to include Todd, for too much of the impossible had occured to take anything to be what it was.

Perhaps things would straighten themselves out, perhaps the few minutes when she and Todd had stood in silence and their souls had mingled was not a horrible illusion like what had happened since. Maybe there would be a time when she could push these events down into her subconscious, and she and Todd could be happy, but not yet. *Maybe* and *perhaps* were words far too thin to trust with the weight of the feeling she knew was still deep within her, and this emotion toward Todd could not be reasoned out, or denied. Still, for now it must be put aside.

Wendy looked at Todd, who was still worriedly watching her. "I'm sorry, Todd," she said, and it almost seemed as though another person was speaking in the mild, remote voice. "What did you say?"

"I said," Todd answered with a tinge of concern and uneasiness in his voice, "that I had something to tell you. May I continue?"

"Yes." It was easier to be terse.

Todd knelt beside her. "After what happened to your uncle earlier this may sound like an odd thing to say, but things aren't as bad as they looked." Ht glanced over at the makeshift table.

"You see," he continued, watching Dr. Osbourne, "Katy Campbell isn't dead."

"—isn't—" What could he mean?

"She came close," Todd continued. "Apparently the strangling attempt was severe enough to put her into a state of extreme neverous shock, and it's not rare, according to Dr. Osbourne, for there to be no pulse or breathing perceptible without instruments."

Wendy tried to grope with what Todd was saying. "But—then something stopped the murderer from—from—"

Todd nodded. "That's what Dr. Nine says."

Something else occurred to Wendy. "But when they learn that they failed, if they don't know it already, the killer will try again."

"Inspector Reed has taken care of that. He's talked with Dr. Osbourne and Dr. Nine, and they've agreed to put her in a private hospital room with a guard. She—"

"With a guard?" Wendy cried. "After what's already happened? Do they really think they can protect her there from someone who's already been able to get into a locked and guarded room in the very same place?"

"Easy there," calmed Todd. "There'll be guards both inside the room and out, as well as outside the window. No one could possibly get to her."

How could he be so blind? "No one could

possibly get to my uncle, either, or that poison bottle, or get into Katy's jail cell—but they did."

"Wendy," Todd raised his hands helplessly, "The Inspector and Dr. Nine are doing all they can."

Two attendants from the hospital ambulance came in and put Katy Campbell on a stretcher. Dr. Osbourne gathered up a few articles from the table and put them in his bag. Snapping it shut, he called to Inspector Reed. "I'm going back to the hospital with Miss Campbell, now. I'll want those arrangements for guards on a working basis within—" he consulted his watch, "—the next half-hour." He shifted his gaze to Dr. Nine. "And I'll see *you* tomorrow morning, along with the Inspector here, if he's obtained court permission for that examination."

"I'll get it," affirmed Inspector Reed. "Cause of death is pretty obvious in this case, though, so it isn't really going to help me much."

"It might," said Dr. Nine. "The world is full of surprises. When can you have the report for us?"

"Tomorrow night," said the physician, and then glanced at his watch again. "Tonight, actually," he corrected himself. "It's past midnight."

Then he was gone, and Dr. Nine regarded Wendy curiously as he lighted his pipe. "Are you feeling a little better?" he asked. "Well enough to go back to the house?"

Wendy shivered. "I'd rather not spend even one night under that roof—not now," she answered, "but I don't suppose I can do anything else now. I—I feel all right now. A lot's been happening," she finished lamely, almost afraid to say that now she was suspicious of everyone.

"To say that a lot has been happening is an unnderstatement," said Dr. Nine with a glance at the Inspector. "You've borne up admirably under it, Wendy, better than most people would." He studied the column of blue smoke from his pipe as it rose on the motionless air in a thin graceful column. "If I'd known—well, immaterial. Ready to go?"

Todd helped her on with her coat, but apparently he had sensed her mood, for he said nothing.

The ride back to Markham House was silent for the most part. The Inspector had remained at the jail to look over the reports of the two lab men who had examined the room. Todd was concentrating on his driving and Dr. Nine seemed a million miles away, puffing on the meerschaum as though it contained opium.

Sydney Saint looked up from a volume of the Britannica as they came in. "I was beginning to wonder if I had inherited this guard duty as a lifetime position."

"Sorry," said Dr. Nine. He glanced at Todd

and Wendy. "We had a few surprises. Anything happen here?"

"Not much." The magician's voice took on a musing tone. "Edward's sister seemed more upset about the loss of her big dinner than her brother. She banged around in the kitchen for a few minutes, and then when the men from the police lab left she went dashing up to the study to make sure they hadn't stolen anything; well, maybe even to look at him; I don't know," Saint confessed. "She came back out a while ago and went back to the kitchen, but just a few minutes before you arrived she turned in for the night, with Gilbert following suit. "I," he gestured with the thick volume, "have been keeping awake with this."

Dr. Nine turned to Wendy. "You'd better try to catch a little sleep, if you can; Todd and I will stay down here and see if we can piece something together out of all this, and maybe Sydney will help us. After all," he waved at the study, its door now ajar, "this thing seems more like a stage illusion than the plan of a killer."

Wendy had started toward the stairs, and now she whirled to face Sydney Saint. "But that's it!" she cried, startling the three men. "The illusion," she explained, "that Mr. Saint was going to tell me about. If Houdini could walk through a brick wall, why couldn't the killer do it the same way?"

Sydney Saint shook his head. "I only wish it could be that simple, but I'm afraid the method doesn't apply. You remember the situation—a brick wall, built on a little frame with casters so it could be spun around, and a rug and plastic sheet to eliminate trapdoors?"

"Yes," affirmed Wendy. "What was the secret?"

"A trapdoor," declared Saint.

"You see," he continued, "it was obvious to the audience that Houdini, clever as he was, couldn't wriggle under the three-inch space between the brick platform and the floor; and the rug and sheet seemed to rule out a hatch. There was one, however, and the wall was positioned to lie right over the middle of it. When it was opened by an assistant beneath the stage, the two covers "gave" enough to provide a wide enough space for Houdini to wriggle under the wall, and then the trap was closed. Normally, one would have been able to see the rug giving a little at the edges, but the committee standing in a circle around the wall held it in position by their own weight."

Wendy was disappointed. Somehow it had seemed so miraculous, and now it was rather simple.

"The point, of course," Saint concluded, "is that in most tricks the thing that makes it look

the most difficult is usually the part that makes it work."

Wendy sighed. "Well, as you say, it doesn't apply here. I only thought—well, it doesn't matter what I thought. Thank you, Mr. Saint. Now I'd better take Dr. Nine's advice and try to get a little rest." As she turned and slowly climbed the stairs Dr. Nine and Sydney Saint went into the foyer-room, but Todd Raymond watched her until she had gone through the doorway to the right of the study.

This was the first time she had been in this part of the house since she had returned. Several doors lined the hall on either side, and between them were portraits of some of the earlier Markhams and Victorian dustcatcher statuary. Her room would be the last on the left, facing out toward the tower and the orchard beyond.

It was much as she had remembered it—everything seemed to have been put into a glass case of time and preserved. The room seemed old, and musty; as though it were begining to turn brown at the edges.

Her suitcases were at the foot of the bed, and while she undressed, and brushed her hair, and selected the less wrinkled of her two nightgowns, she managed to keep the writhing thoughts of what had happened on this most horrible of days from coming to the surface; but when she had

turned out the light and drawn the covers up, they were no longer to be denied.

Outside her misted window she could see the tower, some distance away, though the angle was too sharp for her to make out the window that faced her uncle's study. There had once been a wooden steeple at the top of the tower, but lightning and fire had long ago taken care of that, and now the upper edge of the tower had the soft jaggedness of a rotting tooth.

Slowly Wendy drifted into sleep, but the events of the day churned within her consciousness like unspeakable things beneath the surface of a pool.

There was no rest in the sleep that finally took her.

CHAPTER NINE

HER DREAMS were mostly nightmares, and Wendy couldn't read any sense into the half-thoughts and shadowy imagines that lingered after she awakened.

She was famished, and only now did it occur to her that she had eaten nothing since the previous noon; the murder of Edward Markham had quashed any thought of the dinner he had so carefully planned for and prepared. She wandered downstairs and discovered that Markham House was empty except for herself. Todd had left no note for her and she found that in spite of her resolution of the previous night she felt a curious twinge at this.

She made herself an elaborate breakfast, partly because she was hungry, but more to give herself a project and to keep her mind from the events of the previous evening, and from the silent figure who now rested on a porcelain table in the study where he had died.

Finally, however, the breakfast dishes had been washed and her make-up and dressing were completed; and Todd and Dr. Nine still had not returned. The ashtray in the foyer was filled to overflowing with pipe-tobacco ash, and bits of paper were covered with incomprehensible scrawls and diagrams. It had probably been a long night for them, a night that was continuing into the day.

At length she found herself at the top of the stairs, staring at the study door. It was badly marked from Gilbert's assault on it the previous night—gouges and cracks along the lower part of it, and scratches and small, nail-like holes in the floor in front of it. A half-moon crescent yawned darkly where the lock had been torn from the heavy oak, and oddly enough the door had not been sealed by the investigators.

She reached out, and almost touched the knob; but at the last moment she drew back from it as though it had changed into a cobra. What could she be thinking, what good could come from looking on the work of this phantom killer?

Wendy grabbed up a light jacket in her room and went hurriedly back down the stairs, avoiding even looking at the room of death.

Once outside, she felt better. There was still a slight chill in the air and the sky was bleak and overcast, but even this rather gloomy October weather was preferable to the atmosphere of

brooding evil that hung like a mist in the halls and rooms of Markham House.

Wendy was not even surprised when she realized that, as she had the day before, she was heading toward the house of the High Priestess. Perhaps there was something there—but what about Katy?

It took her some time to find a pay phone, and still longer to finally get through to Dr. Osbourne. Finally he came on the line.

"Hello, young lady! I've just been trying to reach you. Isn't there anyone at the house?"

"No," answered Wendy. "Everyone was gone when I woke up."

"But—" the Doctor seemed puzzled. "Y'mean they didn't even put a guard on the room?"

"No," Wendy repeated. "At least he wasn't there when I woke up."

"Hm. Well, listen, I'll be out there at the house about noon, to meet Dr. Nine and Inspector Reed. I assume that they'll be there, but I'd like to have you there too, to let me in in case they aren't."

Wendy affirmed that she would be back by then. "But Dr. Osbourne," she finally burst out, "this isn't—I've got to know how Katy Campbell is. Is she—all right?"

There was a hesitating silence before Dr. Osbourne replied.

"I don't think," he said at length, "that there

will be any permanent damage, but I can't be sure. Miss Campbell is still in a slight comatose state, and I won't know for sure until she regains consciousness and we've been able to run some tests. If we're allowed to, that is."

"Allowed to?"

"The police have first call on her, you see, and they may not be too worried about slight side effects of this kind on a person who's going to be executed."

Wendy was too stunned to speak for a moment. "But—but they don't still think that, do they?"

Dr. Osbourne's voice was noncommittal. "The fact that someone hated Katy Campbell enough to try to murder her doesn't have any bearing on her guilt—if she is guilty—in the Markham case. Even if she won't reveal how she got out of the room, there are still several witnesses to swear that she was there at the—"

"No!" Wendy cried. "We saw *somebody* wearing a robe. It could have been anyone."

"You forget that you aunt *did* see Miss Campbell, when she answered the door. I'm told she confirmed this to the investigating offivers."

"My aunt!" shouted Wendy. "She's always hated Katy; for all I know *she* might have killed my uncle."

"You mean," said the Doctor drily, "that she can not only float up through solid walls and floors, but also be in two places at once? Who-

ever the person in the blue robe was, and I for one have no reason to believe it wasn't Miss Campbell—neither do the police—it couldn't have been your aunt. Unless," he added in a grotesque light tone, "you imagine that the figure was some sort of puppet that she was controlling somehow, or that *she* was."

"No" Wendy admitted. "I heard the knock at the door, and the footsteps on the stairs when K—when the person in the robe went up to the study. But," she protested, "I know it wasn't Katy! It couldn't have been!"

There was a guzzing click as the phone devoured her dime, and it cut off the first few words of the Doctor's reply. "—fond of Miss Campbell, but I should like to know how you are so sure of something when all the evidence points—"

"I—I'm sorry, Doctor Osbourne," Wendy interrupted, "—my time is up. I'll see you at noon, back at the house." She didn't want to talk any longer with the Doctor; his maddening voice was getting to her, begining to make her doubt her own reasoning, the one thing that she could cling to. She left the booth and began to walk, still heading toward Shoscombe Manor, the house of the High Priestess, though for the moment she did not notice this.

How much of it, she asked herself, really was reason? It was unlike Katy to want to kill any-

thing, Wendy knew, for even when the vicious townspeople had spread the most sickening rumors about her, Katy had had nothing but pity for them. What could possible give her hatred so fierce that it could only be resolved by murder?

And here Wendy had to admit that she had been away from Blackwood for some time; that something might have happened since she had left to change the High Priestess in a horrible way. True, Katy had seemed the same as before, during the brief meeting last night, but how much could one discover in a few short minutes? And even then, Wendy remembered, Katy had been ambiguous and secretive. She had told Wendy that there were things that would have to wait until later that evening, until—something had been settled. And—

And she had asked Wendy to trust her.

Surely, thought Wendy, Katy wouldn't have said something like this if she had been going to commit a murder?

Would she?

Wendy realized that she was driving herself into a circle of questions with no answers, a false framework that loomed up before her like the very Father of Lies himself. She must wait, and talk to Dr. Nine and Inspector Reed. To keep trying to find answers where none existed would do nothing to help, either herself or Katy.

The gravel of the driveway crunched beneath

her feet as she walked into the driveway of Shoscombe Manor. Now it occurred to her, suddenly, that the police might be here, looking for incriminating evidence, but no one was visible anywhere on the grounds. Apparently they must think that with the witch-queen safe under guard they could examine the place at their leisure; and they probably had to get a court order, or something like that.

The front door may have been unlocked, but from force of habit Wendy walked around to the rear entrance. The door was slightly open, and after a long moment of indecision Wendy pushed it wide and went in.

This was the first time she had been in the house of the High Priestess in some years; and it seemed as though the structure existed in a dimension independent of time, for nothing seemed to have changed in the smallest detail. The huge wall paintings were just as she remembered, and the velvet hangings that framed each window still bespoke the luxury of a bygone era.

In the library, second only to the main dining room in size, shelves going twenty feet up were packed with books and manuscripts, and still more were stacked on the floor. In the center of this disorganization, the eye of the hurricane Wendy thought it, was an ancient roll-top desk. It was bare now except for a quill pen and inkwell, the contents of the latter showing a dull crimson in

the thin ribbon of sunlight that penetrated through a gap in the heavy curtains.

A spiral staircase twined up through the center of the house, and slowly Wendy moved up its carpeted steps while she tried to understand what she was doing here, why she had come on this futile search. But she stopped herself before she could start sinking into the morass of riddles.

Most of the rooms on the upper floors were locked, and had been for several years—once, long ago, Katy had opened them for Wendy to explore, but since then no one had set foot within them. Only the master bedroom was unlocked now, and Wendy looked bewilderedly over the bed and dresser, trying to think what might be important, but nothing seemed to be out of place, or—

Wendy froze.

A sound had drifted up through the floor. There was someone in the library.

It took every bit of will-power not to panic. Wait, now, perhaps it was the police, come to search—no. They would have entered through the front door, and would not have been so quiet that Wendy only now had heard them.

Very slowly she edged over to the long closet. A board creaked, and as she ducked under the hanging dresses and robes she heard steps on the stairs, solid and quick. The steps drew nearer, and she heard the bedroom door being flung wide.

For some time there was no sound, and Wendy almost thought the person had departed, but then the footsteps came into the room and toward the place where she hid.

Wendy wanted to scream, but she could not. She could not make a sound. Again the silence, for some few seconds, and then quickly the footsteps drummed off down the hall and down the stairs.

It was some time before Wendy could summon the will to move from her hiding place, though she had heard the rear door slam and there had been no sound for a long time. Her egs felt rubbery, and it was still longer before she felt steady enough to move.

She was still terrified, but Wendy knew that she must look in the library; she must try to find out what the unseen visitor had been doing here. The door had been closed but was not locked, and when she pushed it open and saw that no one waited on the other side she suddenly realized that for a few seconds she had stopped breathing.

At first glance, nothing seemed to have been disturbed, but when she reached the desk something appeared different about it. What was it? Yes, the drawer. It had been flush when she had seen it before, and now it was drawn out slightly. Without knowing why, Wendy picked up a rag from the floor to open it.

Inside was a thick sheaf of parchment, much

of it covered with a small, precise script that Wendy recognized as Katy's. Resting on top of the papers, its clean lines and gleaming surface a sharp contrast to the old parchment, was a long, cylindrical object.

A hypodermic needle, with its syringe.

The syringe was discolored on one side as though it had been held in a flame, but Wendy recognized it. She had seen it, or one like it, on Edward Markham's desk yesterday evening; it was of the kind that he kept for the injections necessary for treatment of his diabetes.

But what could it possibly mean, and why had someone brought it here?

Wendy knew that it was not up to her to try to figure it out. For some reason someone had planted it here, and she must get it to the Inspector—no, to Dr. Nine, for from Dr. Osbourne's talk the police had already made up their minds. They might not even believe her story, thinking she had made it up to try to protect Katy or shift the blame.

She knew that if she wrapped it in a cloth she would probably destroy any fingerprints. She searched about for some time and finally found tape and an envelope, and managed to fix it in position inside the container without touching it herself. As she licked the flap Wendy noted a faint bitter smell from the syringe, as though something had spoiled in it.

It was unlikely that the person would be waiting for her outside, but Wendy felt more comfortable when she was back out on the street and heading toward home. She suddenly noted with a start that it was nearly two in the afternoon—Dr. Osbourne would have come and maybe gone by now!

She quickened her steps, and in a few minutes she had arrived at Markham House. It seemed as quiet as before, but when she went in she found Gilbert in his customary position at the bar in the foyer.

"Don't say anything, don't say a word," he growled before she could speak. "If I want to drink my lunch that's my business, and if I offend you that's your problem."

"I wasn't going to say anything about that, Gil," said Wendy. "It isn't my business, as you say, although it may be your problem. I just wanted to know if anyone else was here."

"No," answered Gilbert Markham. He ticked them off on his fingers. "One: Doc Osbourne finished checking old Uncle a while ago. The Inspector was long gone by then, he had to go over to the hospital because it looked as though Katy Campbell was coming around—but he phoned later to say that she's still out. So Osbourne departed, and your boy friend Raymond and Dr. Nine went down to the hoosegow. Mother is out

shopping, and whatsizname—Saint—is checking into a hotel, because Nine wants him to hang around until tonight, and don't ask me why. Just go away and let me continue doing something more important than talking to you, *dear* cousin."

He drained the glass he was holding and began to make another drink. During the whole speech he had not looked at Wendy even once.

"Thank you, Gil," Wendy said evenly. It would do no good to antagonize him, though in his present mood that hardly seemed possible. "I'll leave you to—what you're doing." She went to the kitchen phone and dialed the police station. It took a little explanation to the desk sergeant before he was able to find Todd.

"Why are you calling here, Wendy?" snapped Todd unexpectedly. "Don't you realize that there are things that have to be done?"

"But—I called because I have something to tell you, something about the case."

"Wendy." Todd's voice seemed cold. "I know you're a friend of Katy's, but you'll have to quit trying to shield her. If you've got anything to tell about the murder it should be to Dr. Nine or Inspector Reed, not me. We'll be back there this evening, and from what Dr. Osbourne says we'll have Miss Campbell with us. Both Dr. Nine and the Inspector want her over there for

some reason. You'll have to wait until tonight. I'm sorry to sound so bruesque but I can't talk any longer. Goodbye."

Wendy stared at the phone. Was everyone going mad? Why on earth should Todd be acting like that?

Dully, she went to her room to change clothes. If something had happened to change Todd's feelings toward her—and then she remembered that she, only the night before, had sworn to herself that she was not going to let her feelings for Todd influence her, or have any effect on her until everything was resolved. Was he trying to put the same sort of protective mechanism into practice?

Or was there some other reason? Had she done something, unknowingly, to make him angry? Wendy tried to think. Todd had been tender and solicitous the last time she saw him, and since then she had—

She had found the syringe that someone had planted, and taken it from Katy Campbell's house. But that shouldn't make him mad, because he couldn't have known about it.

The thought lashed at her like a cobra spitting venom.

Unless he was the killer, and had seen her leave.

For a moment Wendy was on the verge of saying to herself that this was impossible, that she

had been with Todd when the murder of her uncle and the attempt on Katy's life had taken place. But the word *impossible* had seemed to lose its meaning in Blackwood in the past few days, and it was impossible to be sure of anything.

Now that she allowed herself to think of it, she was almost sure she had been seen when she left the house of the high priestess. She had seen no one herself, but the animal instinct that tells you when you are being watched had tingled within her. She was not sure; it could have been her imagination, but she did not think so.

Her mind aching with the thought of what Todd might be, and what it would mean to the feelings in her heart, Wendy sat at the window of her room and watched the shadows of the trees in the orchard lengthen in the failing, overcast light. To her left, the tower stood craggily in place in its gap in the high hedge. Almost without volition of her own, Wendy pulled herself up and went downstairs, and went out by the kitchen door.

Now the tower seemed to fill her sight, looming up before her and filling her vision like the bastion of a medieval castle. The barred window that looked down on her appeared the window of a tower dungeon where someone had dwelt out an eternity. Suddenly the tower, where she had played as a child and which she knew so well,

seemed a citadel of evil, and she drew back from it.

The garden was a light counterpoint to the grimness of the steeple's remains; though much of the vegetation had retired after the first frosts had given their warnings, there was still a velvety green of seeded grass over much of the garden area, broken here and there in irregular patches and in one almost invisible line of dead grass pointing toward her. A few peonies, surprisingly, still flourished also; and wildflowers added to the soft colors of the gentle autumn garden. Its feeling was a far different one than that given by the rest of Markham House—and its inhabitants.

There was a break in the hedge to the left of the tower, and Wendy pushed through. Here, long neglected and fallen into disuse, was the ancient cemetery, a feature that Markham House shared with the witch queen's home. Few of the stones were of a later date than 1750; many of them were shattered or fallen, and in places the ground had fallen in slightly as Nature had taken the remains back into her circle of time.

Here Wendy could no longer see the main floor of Markham House; but the window of her uncle's study was clearly visible. It was, she noted with a start, still open, though why this should bother her she did not know.

The sky seemed to be growing darker very quickly; Wendy had not brought a coat. She felt

the bite of the wind through the hedge that hid her from the house, and moved toward the tower and the break in the greenery.

Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, a voice cried out on the other side of the hedge.

"Wendy!" it cried.

The wind rose toward a whistling scream.

CHAPTER TEN

GILBERT MARKHAM pushed through the hedge. Trying to read Wendy's frozen expression, he said, "Why didn't you answer? I couldn't figure out what had happened to you."

"I—I'm sorry," she answered, recovering her numbed senses, "I didn't hear you calling." It was simply that the events of the past day had left her emotionally raw—she was sensitive to the slightest unexpected event, and, she suspected, was beginning to build such things up into more than they were, as she had with Todd's behavior on the phone.

Gilbert just stood watching her. "What—what did you want me for?" Wendy asked.

"Mother's back," he said, and now that he spoke more slowly she noticed an odd, unnamable quality in his voice. "She's making a little dinner," Gilbert continued, "and wanted me to find you." Again he lapsed into silence.

Wendy made no reply but followed him into the house. Her aunt was busy at the stove and only nodded with a slight smile, the first smile, thought Wendy, that she had seen from Agnes Markham in some time.

Dinner half an hour later was as bleak as the day had been; a sort of boiled-beef concoction that Wendy could only pick at, little as she had eaten. She was not about to say anything, however, and made the usual noises of approval and left as soon as she could.

On her way to her room Wendy stopped before the door of her uncle's study. What was it, she thought, what beast, devil or sorcerer was it that could walk in this room, solid enough to plunge a knife into someone, yet intangible enough to vanish like smoke up a chimney? She looked down at the two holes she had noticed earlier in the floor in front of the door. Perhaps that's it, she mused dismally, perhaps whoever murdered my uncle just changed into a worm and went down through the floor. It almost seemed as likely as anything else.

But still she could not force herself to enter. Her aunt had said at dinner that the body of Edward Markham would be removed to the funeral parlor in the morning, but now it still rested on the police lab table in the study. Then, perhaps, she could look on her uncle's remains, but not

now, not in the room where supernatural murder had been done. She went back to her room and flung herself down on the bed.

Soon, she reasoned with herself, Todd and Dr. Nine would be here; and then she could show them the thing that she had found at Katy's and—

Katy Campbell. Dr. Osbourne had said that she was to be brought here, too. What would Katy feel when she found out about the syringe, and that Wendy had been probing about at Shoscombe Manor? Would she think that Wendy had not believed her, had not taken seriously her plea the night before that Wendy must trust her?

And what if Wendy were mistaken? What if she had jumped to a conclusion, and the visitor at the house of the witch-queen had been searching like herself, and had *not* planted the hypodermic needle in the desk? Suppose it had been put there by Katy herself, before the police had found her?

Still, what could it matter? Edward Markham had been stabbed, and Katy herself the victim of an attempted strangling—what could the needle have to do with it in any case? She could not conceal it, whatever happened, but if only she could know what it meant!

She had not heard her aunt's footsteps, and the woman startled her—again—when she spoke from the doorway. "There's a phone call for you,

Wendy. Someone from the police station, I believe." Without waiting for Wendy to say anything Agnes Markham turned and went back toward the stairs.

Quickly Wendy made her way down to the foyer and picked up the phone. "This is Miss Markham. Todd?"

"No, Ma'am." The voice was indistinct and muffled. "Mr. Raymond's not here. He said you should go back to Miss Campbell's house and he and Dr. Nine will meet you there."

This sounded odd. "When am I to meet them?"

"Just as soon as you get there. That's all the message they left." Without waiting for an answer the person at the other end of the line hung up.

Wendy pulled on a coat and went back to her room to retrieve her purse, with the envelope containing the syringe. Why would they want her to meet them there, after the other arrangements had been made? Perhaps, she thought, Katy had regained consciousness and told them something that had sent them there.

It was quite dark, now. The heavy clouds dimmed the moon to an almost invisible glow, and if Wendy had not known the way so perfectly she might have become lost. As it was, it took her longer than usual to get there, and she was not too

surprised to see that no one else had arrived yet. On a night like this it would be very easy to miss the turning first time around.

For the third time in slightly more than twenty-four hours Wendy found herself entering the house of the High Prestess. It seemed as though every event turned on the personality of the woman who inhabited this ancient structure, even more than the house where Edward Markham had lived—and died.

She made her way up to the library. Nothing had changed since she had been here last, not that she had expected it to. She flicked the light switch.

Nothing happened.

When she had been here earlier there had been little light, but she had not had occassion to use the electricity; but she had seen a small electric clock in the kitchen when she entered. The time had been obviously wrong, but it had been running. Now—

She went into the hallway and tried another switch. It clicked futilely in the darkness.

And with that click something came back to her, and the carpeted floor grew unsteady beneath her. The voice on the phone had said, ". . . go *back* to Miss Campbell's house," but no one had known that she had been there!

Except the person who had searched there for

her, and who had waited when they had not found her, and had seen her come out.

Except the killer.

The door slammed downstairs, and Wendy screamed.

Almost fainting with terror, she stumbled up the spiral staircase to the second floor, as footsteps raced up from the rear entrance level to the main floor. She moved down the hall toward Katy's room until she realized that she was putting herself in a dead end if she went any further. She crouched behind a curlicued Victorian pedestal and waited, not daring to breathe.

The footsteps came to the top of the stairs, and now, dimly, she could make out a shape moving down the hall toward her. It came closer . . .

Closer . . .

And passed by within two feet of her. Very clearly, Wendy could see the kitchen knife in the killer's hand.

The figure moved on, and into Katy Campbell's bedroom. Wendy gathered her nerve, for she knew she must move now. If she waited, the murderer was bound to discover her.

She was up and running toward the stairs, and she heard a muffled crash as the killer tried to follow. But then, as she half-ran, half-fell down the steps she heard the running feet come closer.

Suddenly there was nothing under her, and she

fell forward. The floor came up to meet her and her head crashed numbingly against it. The footsteps slowed and stopped, and now, half-mad with sick fear and the concussion, Wendy turned painfully on her side.

Her pursuer stood above her, the knife raised high. Wendy did not move or cry out, for all strength and resistance were drained from her.

Then, as from nowhere, a hand lashed out and the knife clattered away into the darkness. Another figure appeared, and for several seconds the two were locked in struggle, but then from her attacker came a yelp of agony as the other figure twisted.

A voice said, "Dr. Nine! Get that power on!" Almost before the words were finished the lights from the crystal chandeliers came on, and for a moment Wendy was blinded.

As vision came back to her the first thing she saw was Todd Raymond, his face strained and perspiring.

Locked in Todd's restraining hold, with a face turned to a mask of rage and hatred, was Gilbert Markham.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I SUPPOSE I could wait and let you read all about it in the newspapers," said Dr. Nine as the Bentley purred back toward Markham House, "but there are things still to be shown for what they are tonight, and I doubt that any paper would want to print much of what you'll hear."

"But—but *Gilbert!*" Wendy protested. She had pressed herself closely against Todd's side. This did Todd's driving no good at all but he has seen fit not to complain.

"Young lady," said the Doctor, "You shall know all in good time. Even Inspector Reed does not know all, though at this point he thinks he does."

"Is that why you're having him bring Gilbert back to the house with us?"

"All questions shall be answered," promised Dr. Nine. "But we must never leave a play until the curtain falls, even—" he puffed on the meer-

schaum pensively, "even if the play is a tragedy."

And he would say no more until the Bentley had arrived at Markham House.

Sydney Saint stood on the porch. "Your Inspector friend is inside, together with a handcuffed gentleman and his yowling mother. Also Dr. Osbourne and the beautiful Miss Campbell, who hasn't said a word except that she won't until you're here."

The emotional temperature of the room where the five people waited could be felt the instant they entered. Dr. Nine surveyed the five with an expression almost of pain, as they all started to speak at the same time.

"Silence!" he roared. "We are not done here yet. With your permission, Reed, we'll go upstairs." Dr. Nine assumed it, for he had already turned on the lights and begun to set the fire when the rest trooped in. Wendy sat on the windowsill, holding Todd beside her, and waited. Finally everyone was inside. Two policemen positioned themselves at the door, and Inspector Reed nodded to Dr. Nine.

"The trouble with this whole thing," said the Doctor, "was that we forgot what, I believe, Mr. Saint was telling Wendy here just yesterday. Quite often, he said, the thing that makes something seem really impossible is what really makes it work. Well," Dr. Nine puffed majestically, "we

had something of the sort here. A man had been murdered, and the thing that kept us from really coming up with the killer was this vanishing of a person from the room. I said myself at the time that it was more like a stage illusion than a murder, and it didn't occur to me until this morning that I had been speaking the literal truth. I only realized it when I saw the coat-hangers."

"Coat-hangers?" echoed Inspector Reed.

Dr. Nine nodded. "But you'd come to that conclusion, too. His attack on Miss Markham, his own cousin, kind of puts the rope around Gilbert Markham's neck. Any theories as to how he might have done it? You," he glared at Dr. Osbourne, "keep quiet. Our friend the Inspector has not stopped to read your report of your examination this afternoon—not that you're any more correct than he'll be."

Wendy was, if anything, more puzzled than she had been, and her feelings seemed to be shared by several of the people there, including Inspector Reed.

"I don't see how that would help, in view of the circumstances," said the Inspector. "But it's fairly simple; when he broke into that room he was alone for several seconds, and here was his uncle in the chair, having drunk so much brandy that he had passed out, and dropped the decanter. Gilbert thinks she's hiding, maybe, or gone out the window—" he nodded at Katy Campbell,

who had not spoken a single word, even to Wendy. "—and so he grabs up a knife from the desk and—"

The Inspector made a short stabbing motion with his hand, and Wendy felt her heart thudding. She gripped Todd's arm more tightly.

"Motive?" queried Dr. Nine.

"We'll find one," said the Inspector.

Suddenly Gilbert Markham stood up, and the policeman guarding him brought his hand to his pistol. "What's this whole damn thing for?" he shouted. "You know I killed the old swine, and I'll tell you why! Because he was going to give our money away to that—that *bitch!*"

"Shut up," said Dr. Nine, "and sit down. You almost tempt me to say nothing more, but other things must be settled. First, however, we have to clear up the first impossibility." He looked at Katy Campbell. "We found one observer of the outside scene here, Mr. Dunlop. His testimony was interesting, since it seemed to confirm the miracle, until we consider two things: First, that while from his viewpoint behind the hedge he could see the study window, he could see nothing of the ground floor. Wendy found that out this morning, she told me. This also meant that he couldn't see the back door and that, logically, someone coming out the back door couldn't see him. Second, that his observations

only began just prior to the smashing of the bottle—and the murder."

Still looking at Katy, Dr. Nine continued. "So Dunlop's testimony is interesting, but specious in respect to all of what happened. But there was another observer, who had come here because she wanted to prevent what she feared might happen —Miss Campbell. You were in the woods off to one side of the house, and you saw the rear window clearly. What *did* you see?"

Katy spoke in an even, flat tone, looking only at Dr. Nine. "At first I just saw a ladder, propped up against the edge of the flower bed and leaning against the wall just under the study window. While I was looking, someone came out of the window and down the ladder, carrying the robe and what looked like twisted wires—the light was very dim."

"Was it bright enough for you to recognize who it was?" asked Dr. Nine.

"Yes." Katy stood up and walked across the room. She pulled back the sheet and looked at the still face, and then looked back at Dr. Nine. "It was him—Edward Markham."

Inspector Reed looked from the High Priestees to Dr. Nine as though he were not sure which of the three of them were crazy. Todd made no movement, but Wendy could see that he was as puzzled as she.

"And did you stay there much longer?"

"Only for a few minutes," Katy answered. "I knew Edward Markham was planning something to embarrass me, or involve me, and I didn't want to stay around."

Dr. Nine nodded. "And you saw something else. You had to, because someone moved that ladder. The same person who robbed Dr. Osbourne's hospital of prussic acid, after reading this." He held up the book Wendy had seen him with the previous night. "This book, IN THE NAME OF CONSCIENCE, is the confession of a Soviet assassin. In it he describes, among other things, how Russian agents killed their victims with a simple squirtgun loaded with hydrogen cyanide. A blast in the face gave all the effects of death by coronary thrombosis—which is what Dr. Osbourne's medical report reads."

Inspector Reed started to say something, but Dr. Nine waved him down. "You were correct, as far as you went. Gilbert Markham did everything you said—except kill his uncle, who was already dead. The killer had murdered Markham with the stolen poison—stolen with the same instrument later used to try to strangle Katy Campbell, a harvesting pole they use in the orchards. With the rope loop it's rather simple to stick the device through a window, even a barred one, and around a bottle—or a neck."

"But then Katy—" began Wendy.

"I will have *silence,*" growled the Doctor. "The killer had no squirtgun handy, but a loaded hypodermic needle can shoot further than the best, as far as from the tower window," he pointed beyond Wendy, "to where Edward Markham stood, after the killer drew him to the window. The killer, who heated the prussic acid in the hypo to be sure it would vaporize—it didn't, as a matter of fact, and some of it fell and killed a thin line of grass in the garden below. The killer, who took away the ladder to make the illusion a miracle. The killer, who was the only one in on the illusion, and therefore the only one who knew in advance what would happen and could plan a murder scheme. The killer," the repeated phrase sounded like a hammer to Wendy, "whom Katy Campbell saw before she ran away, out of fear at what was being plotted." He wheeled on Katy Campbell. "Who was the other person?"

Katy nodded toward the person standing at the fireplace, now groping for a poker before being subdued by the iron grip of a policeman. "I saw her—Agnes Markham."

"I'll have to explain all the rest to Inspector Reed later," said Dr. Nine after the mother and son had been taken out, cursing each other and Dr. Nine in a sickening display. "But what it basically boils down to was this; Edward Mark-

ham felt guilty about an accident long before—he had an argument with Wendy's father during a hunting trip, an argument about Miss Campbell, to be exact. A little while later his gun went off accidentally and his brother was killed. Frightened, he made up a story of his brother slipping while climbing a bank, and everyone seemed to accept that—everyone except Katy Campbell, who stole the shoes Wendy's father had worn, which bore not a trace of mud and thus disproved the story."

Katy nodded. "I gave them to him, finally, just after Wendy left. I'd accepted his story that it was just an accident, but it had taken me a long time, especially since I felt sort of protective about Wendy. I felt I'd somehow been responsible for what happened."

Dr. Nine took up the thread. "So Edward Markham determined, still feeling guilty, that he would make amends by dividing his money, a lot of which was inherited from his brother, between Wendy and Katy—which left his sister and her son out in the cold, almost literally: it wasn't the best thing he could have done, even if it hadn't cost him his life.

"But, with Wendy coming up especially for this beneficence, and Sydney Saint here, it wasn't enough to do what he considered the honorable thing; no, first he was going to show them that he was just as good at the mumbo-jumbo as he

imagined them—Katy and Mr. Saint—to be. And he thought up the illusion.

"Quite simple, basically. Once in his room, Markham gets the wire framework from its hiding place. It's a crude thing, but under a robe with a hood it will keep a human shape. He made it with wire coat hangers. With the frame and the robe he goes down the ladder; puts them on, frame under the robe, and knocks at the door. When his sister lets him in he goes up to the study. There are a couple of holes in front of the door that Wendy said she's noticed a few times, and it's into these holes that Markham sticks the supporting frame. Since the whole thing is loose and flowing, and is resting on the frame on his shoulders, he can open the door and, shielded by the robe itself, duck inside to turn around and reappear as himself. Then he just lifts the frame —none too strong by the way; I'm told it was swaying even in that short time—up out of the holes by the shoulder support, and brings it inside as though ushering Katy into his sanctum.

"The door's closed and locked. He crumples up the frame and throws it into the closet, pulling down some other hangers and clothes on top of it. Wendy told me she'd seen the closet before and it had been neat, when I asked her to describe the room; and so the hangers had to be the basic part of the gimmick to the illusion. The robe—"Dr. Nine looked at the fireplace. "It was

sweltering in here the way that fire was going, yet the window was open. Why have so big a fire with an open window, unless you're burning something?"

"And his sister," said Wendy, "—waited until she knew he was finished cleaning up his little illusion, to show how the witch had vanished before she ever arrived, and then she went up into the tower and squirted the acid from the needle into his face."

"Right," affirmed the Doctor. "He staggered back into the room, not realizing what was happening, and fell into his desk chair as he grabbed for some brandy. He was probably dead before the bottle hit the floor. Our bum Dunlop sees him draw back from the window—even hears the hiss of the squirting hypo, but because of the hedge he doesn't see Agnes Markham, her murderous work done, go back into the kitchen so she can race out into the front hall."

Dr. Nine laughed, but it was not a pleasant laugh. "Even there she made a bad mistake, which I only found out about after I had figured out what had happened from the rest of the evidence." He glared at Todd. "She waited until Saint came back down and called the police, and then asked you if her brother was dead. When you confirmed this, and added that he'd been stabbed in the heart, she yelled that it was impossible, he couldn't have been. Why should she

think so, unless she knew what *had* killed him?"

Todd shifted uneasily. "There were so many things going on then," he struggled, "besides—"

"Besides," completed Dr. Nine, smiling at Wendy, "he had his thoughts on something else. He's been half-insane worrying about you all day, and when you called him up he practically bit your head off to cover it up."

"Well," said Todd, "it's all wrapped up anyway. We've got the matches she used, and the pole that matches that piece of rope, both with her fingerprints."

"They won't be necessary," said Dr. Nine. "I'm willing to bet that she'll try to plead guilty but insane. It may be the most appropriate thing. What they do with her son is another question, but he'll be behind bars no witch can float through for a long time."

"In that case," said Todd, "I have some work of my own to do. If you'll excuse us?"

"As a matter of fact," said Dr. Nine, "Miss Campbell and I were just going to say the same thing. It's been a while since she's seen the beauties of Manhattan."

Sydney Saint looked at the two pairs, and then at Dr. Osbourne. "Tell me," he said, "do you play cards?"

The Bentley had driven off; Wendy stood with Todd watching the taillights fade in the distance.

"I have one last question," she said, "how did you know I was at Katy's?"

"We didn't," Todd answered. "It just happened that we spotted Gilbert Markham and, since we were going to have to take him back to your place anyway, we followed him—fortunately for you and that little chunk of evidence you were carrying."

Wendy smiled up at Todd, and suddenly they were kissing, a long, loving kiss that held promises of a loving time to come. Then Todd fished in his pocket and came up with a small leather box. Inside, when Wendy opened it, she found a diamond ring . . .

"That," said Todd when he next could draw breath, "was all in the past," and he gestured at Markham House, "so forget it."

"I will," said Wendy, "because we are all of the future." Then the two stood silently and waited for the sun to rise.

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